Famous Artists Course

Famous Artists Schools, Inc., Westport, Connecticut

Figure composition — arranging figures in a picture

Lesson 8

Albert Dorne

Fred Ludekens

Norman Rockwell

Al Parker

Ben Stahl

Stevan Dohanos

Jon Whitcomb

Robert Fawcett

Peter Helck

George Giusti

Austin Briggs

Harold Von Schmidt

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This illustration by Albert Dorne reminds us that a figure composition is more than an arrangement of well-drawn figures — it must also portray human relationships. People in pictures must express their emotions and their reactions to each other — and, above all, these must be clear to the viewer.

Figure composition

In the third lesson of this Course we saw that the difference between a good picture and a poor one depends greatly on the soundness of its composition – the way things are arranged within the picture borders. Furthermore, we saw that a weak composition could not be improved simply by better drawing of individual things. In many of our demonstrations we used exactly the same drawing in both the poor compositions and the good ones. The differences were created by changes in placement, the relative size of things, and values, and by the more logical use of the space in which we were making our picture – not by differences in drawing.

Since that third lesson we have been learning to draw the human figure – by studying first its basic form, then the anatomy of the body and how it moves, its most expressive parts, the head and hands, and finally how to draw clothed figures in actions that are convincing. Now we are ready to put together everything we have learned so far and use it to draw people in pictures that have meaning – not just drawings of isolated figures or studies of heads or hands, but pictures of people in real-life situations – people expressing emotions, people reacting to each other and to their surroundings.

We haven't used figures this way before. It is true that Lesson Three contained some figures, but we used them as if they were still-life objects – moving them around the picture space just as we would a bottle or a tree. They related to the other things in the picture only in a compositional way – only as shapes of a certain size or value, with outlines that might help lead our eye around the picture. We did not consider the human relationships of the figures. Now we are going to.

This new approach does not change the compositional relationships of the figures to the picture – it simply adds a human quality to the figures and their relationship to each other. Everything that you learned about composition in Lesson 3 applies to figure composition. This is important – don't forget it as you learn how to handle the new considerations in this lesson.

The people in our pictures, like the people we meet in everyday life, will have feelings and emotions. In real life they can express their emotions and explain their actions with words. In a picture, however, people can communicate only by expression and gesture. By its look and action we must make the figure tell everything.

One of the world's greatest painters, Leonardo da Vinci, summed it all up hundreds of years ago. He said: "We must show by the action of the body the attitude of the mind." In this lesson we shall see how this can be done. We shall learn that there are certain poses that communicate the feeling and thoughts of the figure with all the clarity of words.

Figures do not exist in a vacuum. One of the valuable things we shall learn about is how to place the figure in a setting that does not interfere with, but explains and strengthens its action. In real life, if we want to see something more clearly or follow an action, we can move our eyes, head, or body. In a picture, only a fixed view is possible. That view must show the most descriptive point of the action – and the figure must be placed in that spot in the picture where it will best clarify the action.

In a figure composition there may be one person or a hundred, and arranging each number of figures has its own problems and possibilities. Here we shall see how groups of all sizes may be handled. We shall work with them much the way a stage director does, paying attention to selecting appropriate characters, costumes, props, lighting, and a view that is clear and effective.

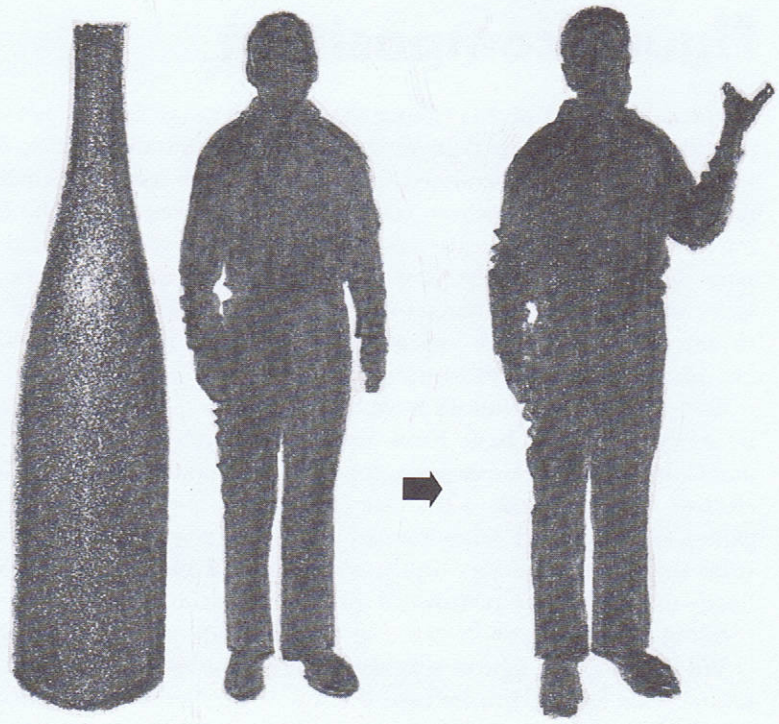
Above all, we shall become very much aware that a good figure composition is far more than a few figures drawn in some relation to each other or placed within four borders. The artist must create a sharp and meaningful statement about a situation and the feelings of the people involved in it. Everything in this lesson has been planned to show you how to make this statement – in a picture that viewers will understand, feel, and remember.

The figure is a living, changing shape

The drawings on this page demonstrate the striking difference between the human figure and the fixed shape of an inanimate object. The figure is alive – it is a mobile form which constantly changes shape. It can stretch out, curl up, lean, bend – assume countless different positions.

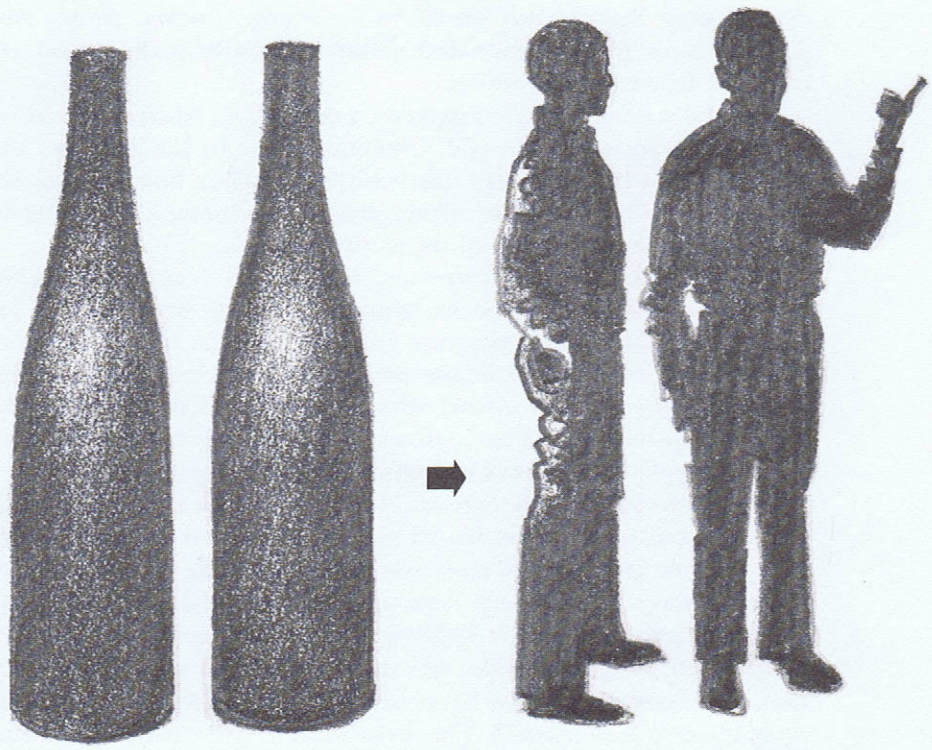
It is this very aliveness that makes pictures with figures so interesting. When we put two bottles in a picture, they may stand side by side or overlap, but they are still inanimate objects. It is very different when we place two figures together. They immediately seem to be related, to respond to each other. If they are facing, they may seem to be talking. If they are looking in the same direction, they may appear to be gazing at the same object. Depending on the attitudes or gestures we give our figures, the meaning of the picture will change.

We can say only a limited number of things with still-life objects – but with the living, changing figure we can express the whole range of human relationships and experiences.

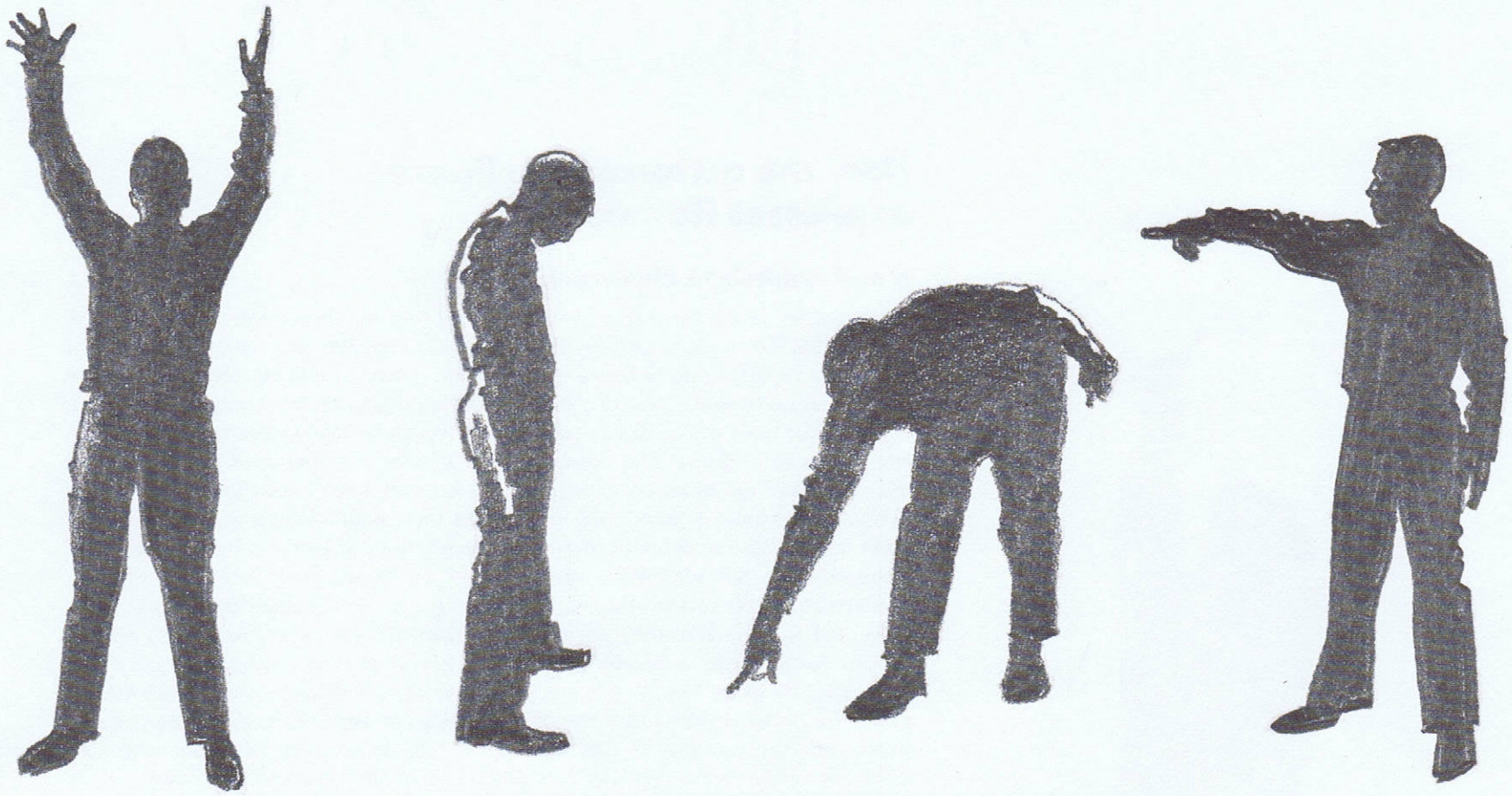


The bottle represents a typical inanimate object — a fixed shape. By contrast, the figure next to it, even in a static standing pose, has the quality of life. The simple raising of an arm creates a new shape and a new meaning.

See — Observe — Remember



Two bottles are no less inanimate than one. But adding one figure to another creates an entirely new situation. These two figures react to each other. They form a human relationship. One man talks, the other listens.



Here are just a few of the countless gestures the figure can assume. The upraised arms express excitement, the slump tells of weariness or sorrow. Bending over or pointing, the figure actively relates to something else.

Our two figures can express many moods and feelings — the friendliness of a handshake, the fear and menace of a holdup, the heat of an argument. In each, the mobile figure's shape explains the situation.

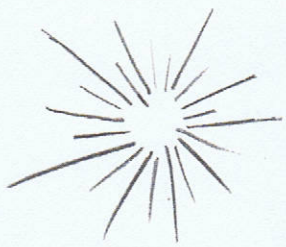
How the action of the figure expresses its mood

Mood symbols to aid meaning

In an earlier lesson we learned that the head and hands are the most expressive parts of the figure. But the body itself expresses emotion, too. Much of the art of the artist in arranging a figure composition consists in using the whole figure expressively. He must show the feelings and emotions by the action of the body.

When the body moves, it creates different shapes which we associate with different moods or feelings. The droop of weariness or the spring of joy are typical associations of figure action with feeling. The good artist knows how clearly these actions communicate mood and feeling and uses them to their fullest in his pictures. It is helpful to think of these expressive actions or gestures in terms of mood symbols which quickly convey the feeling of the figure. The most basic of these symbols and their relationship to the figure are shown on these two pages.

In real life the emotions are often confused or not expressed clearly by the action. For example, a person may assume a pose that suggests sorrow although he is actually quite happy. We are not aware of this discrepancy in real life because the person's words may reveal his feelings or because in a moment he will move and assume a gesture that fits them better. There is no place for such accidental or contradictory gestures in a picture. The one view you show must be the right one – the clear one – the one that expresses just the emotion you want.



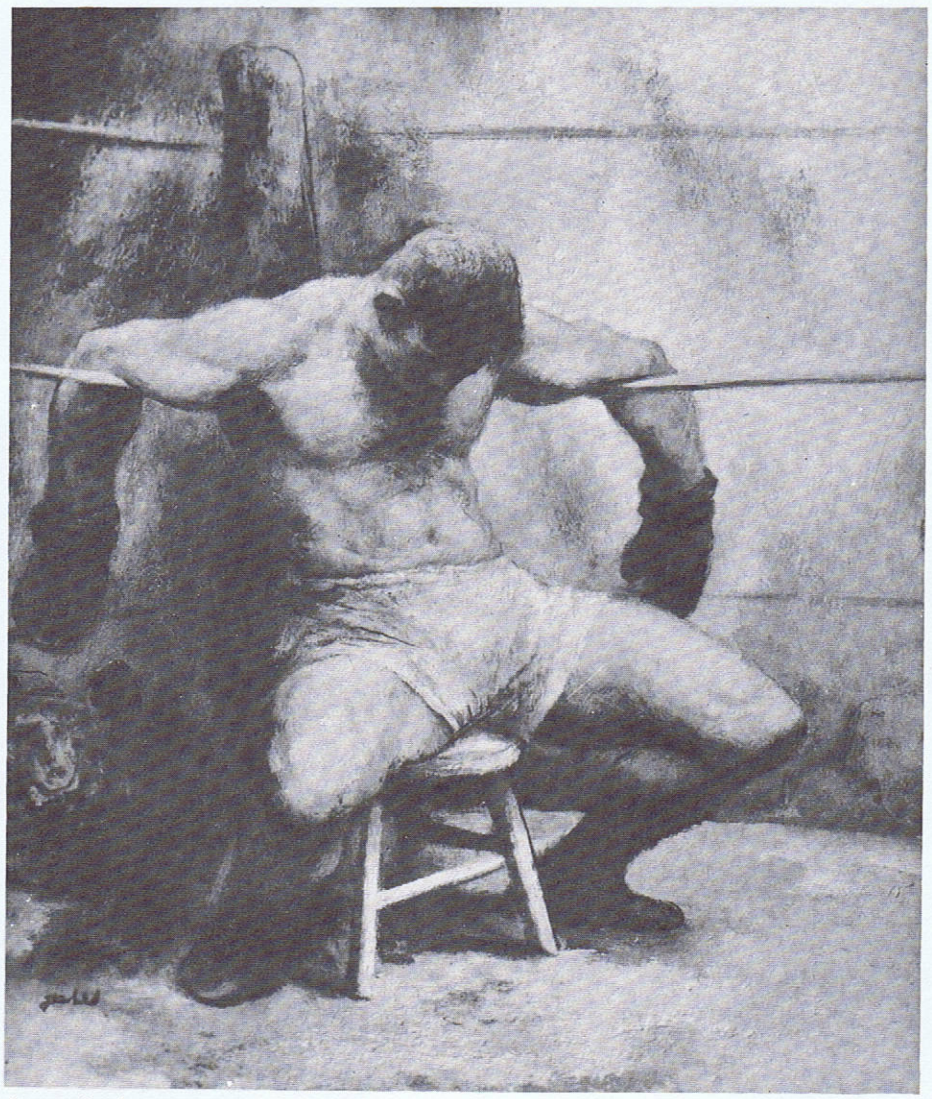
Happy, bright, gay: Here the outstretched arms and legs help form a shape which literally radiates gladness. The whole soaring action is one of joy.

Weary, sad, dejected: This mood is in direct contrast to the one above. Notice how clearly the sagging, drooping gesture expresses sorrow, guilt, or fatigue.

Quiet, gentle, sensual: Rhythmic, flowing shapes with soft, curving lines make up this mood symbol. Angular forms are minimized.

Dramatic, explosive, exciting: Although as energetic as our symbol of joy, this one is more powerful and dramatic. Its jagged lines and sharp angles create a strong feeling of action and drama.

Aspiring, righteous, dominating: This figure has a vertical quality which gives us a feeling of stability and strength. Its upward-reaching lines may also suggest an aspiring or spiritual mood.



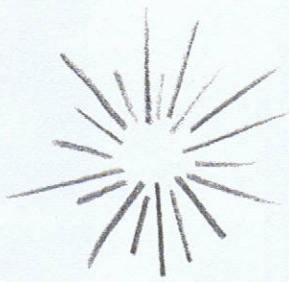
Courtesy Esquire

Ben Stahl

The feeling expressed in this painting is one of great weariness and impending defeat. Not only does the figure slump and sag — even more than the symbol — but everything else acts to stress the mood. Value, particularly, is important here. The dark, depressing background shadows seem to settle heavily over the corner of the ring.

Mood symbols in action

The illustrations on these two pages are excellent examples of how our mood symbols can guide us in selecting an effective pose. Each of the figures expresses a different mood — and this mood is immediately and clearly established by the figure's action.



Al Parker

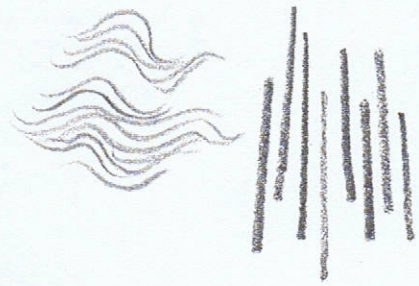
At the right, we see how Al Parker pictures a lively, happy mood. Joy literally radiates from the figure and fills the picture space. A less thoughtful artist might have settled for a pose like the one below — justifying it by saying it is more true to life. But, in spite of the smile on the girl's face, her mood of happiness is greatly subdued because the over-all action does not support it.

Courtesy American Airlines

Norman Rockwell

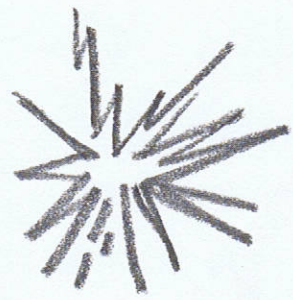
This picture of Lincoln delivering the Gettysburg Address shows another of our mood symbols at work. The tall vertical shape of the President creates a convincing impression of dignity. This feeling is strengthened by the positive vertical lines of the flagpole and table legs.

Courtesy Coronet



Ben Stahl

This painting shows us in a wonderfully clear way how much our mood symbols can contribute to the meaning of a picture. The sensual, voluptuous figure of Salome contrasts dramatically with St. John the Baptist, who is an austere, spiritual symbol.



Fred Ludekens

Fred Ludekens has made able use of the explosive symbol to express this rugged bit of action. The outflung arms and legs of the battling figures make a sharp, jagged pattern that instantly says violence.

Select the most descriptive pose

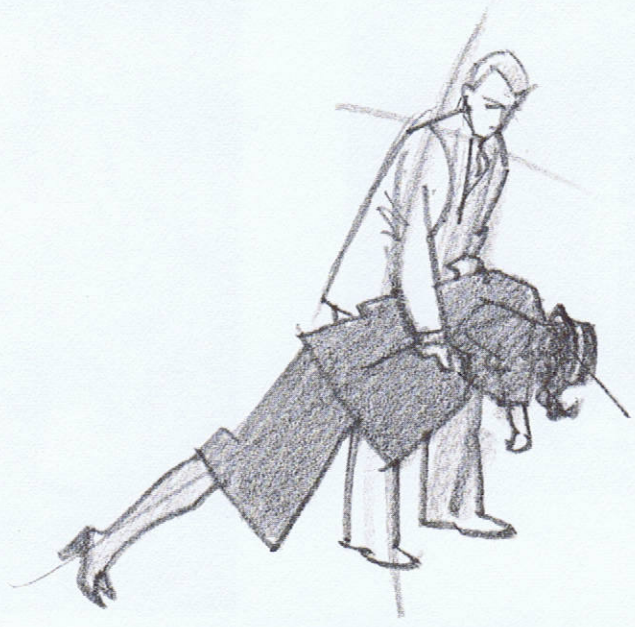
In our first composition lesson we showed you that it is very important to choose a view of an object that makes it easy to recognize. We used a teapot and a sugar bowl to demonstrate that a form can be clear or confusing depending on the angle from which we view it.

When we compose figures in a picture, there is not only the view to be considered but the pose as well. Because the figure is so highly mobile, it can express the same action by many different gestures and attitudes. Some of these are more descriptive and recognizable than others. We must select one that is entirely suitable to our purpose, expressing just as much as possible by two-dimensional shape or silhouette alone.

The illustrations below show why this is necessary. Although all six are possible views of the same action, one describes it with the greatest clarity and drama. The Faculty pictures on the opposite page, all with three or more figures, are successful only because the artists experimented until they arrived at a figure arrangement that got their idea across instantly. Like them, you should try out your figures in different compositions until you have found a clear and expressive way to arrange them.

The problem: To show a clear and dramatic view of a fainting girl in a man's arms.

1 The girl is unconscious, clearly enough, but the grip the man has on her looks like a wrestling hold. His upraised hand may even lead us to suspect he has strangled her.



2 The situation is still obscure. It looks as though the man is lifting the girl from the ground. The action is spread out too much and it is clumsy.

3 One figure almost hides the other so that we cannot be sure what is happening. The girl seems to be in a state of emotional collapse rather than a faint.

4 Is he teaching her an exercise? Because the girl's feet are in an active pose on the ground, it is not clear that she has fainted. The over-all shape of the two figures is quite awkward.

5 Although the relationship between the two figures is better than before, it is still far from perfect. The man's figure is not involved enough in the action and he appears to be studying the girl.

6 **Final choice:** In this pose the figures express the action clearly and effectively. Every line of the girl's form slumps — every line of the man's is angular and active. There is no question but that he is supporting her dead weight. The fact that he is looking at her face gives the two a personal relationship, and the front view helps us to see this. All of the other drawings show the same situation, but none does so as dramatically as this one.

Al Parker

In this illustration Al Parker has made good use of mood symbols to compose an effective story-telling silhouette. The tall, strong shapes of the policemen on each side of the slumped figure show us at a glance what is happening. The dark, ominous shadows strengthen the sense of drama.

Norman Rockwell

Here, two figures are closely related, while the third is purposely isolated to emphasize her mood. Notice how her slumped, unhappy attitude contrasts with the sprightly poses of the other two. The tones are much brighter than in the Parker illustration, the higher key accenting the liveliness and humor of the picture. Like the other illustrations here, this is a vignette — it has no background — but the story is still amply clear.

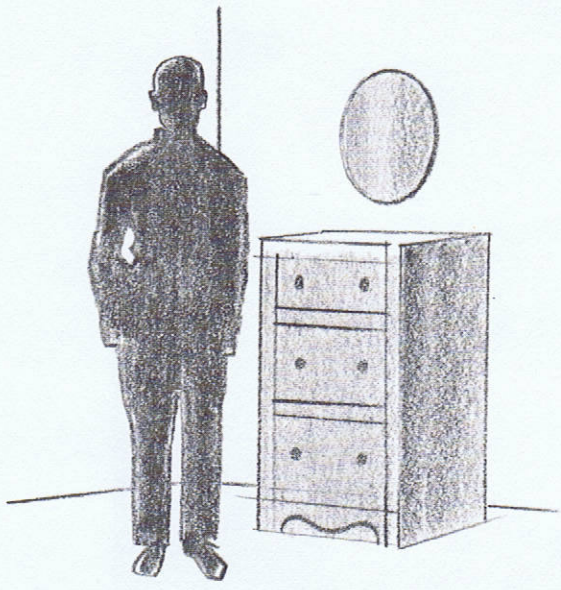
Austin Briggs

There is only one relaxed figure in this illustration — the smiling man in the shirt — and the artist has carefully silhouetted his stable, vertical form. Notice the contrast in the figures at the left, and how skillfully they are organized and designed to show their faces, actions, and tensions. They jointly make an explosive, angular shape that lunges or points to the center of interest, the smiling figure. The feeling is one of excitement, despite the slight humor in the situation.

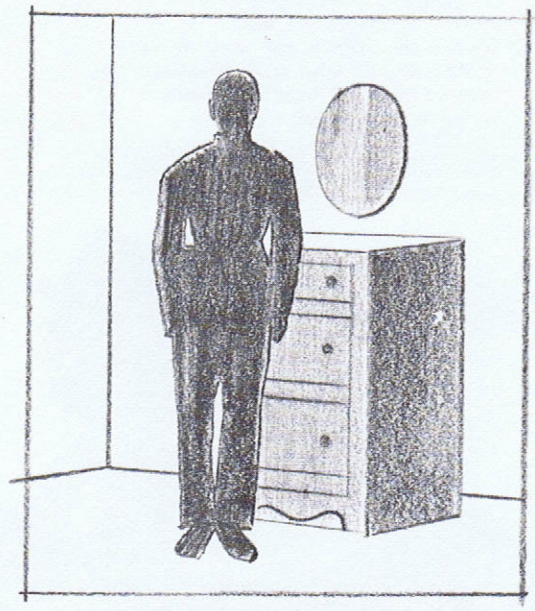
Let's add a simple setting

Most figure compositions include a place as well as people. It may be anywhere — from the corner of a room to a vast forest. The artist may show just a little of the setting or he may make it dominate his picture.

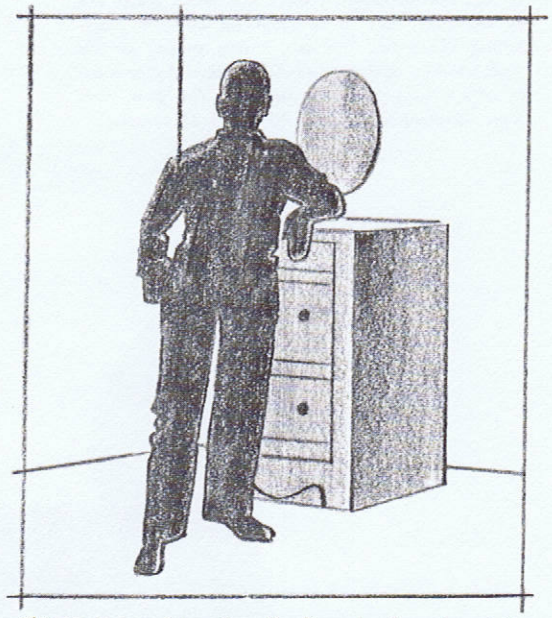
The role of the setting varies greatly. Often it simply serves as a background which tells us where the figure is. In many pictures, though, the setting is more important and the figures make actual use of it. The illustrations below are planned to introduce you, in a simple way, to the possibilities a setting offers. Whether it plays a large role or a small one in your picture, always use it to strengthen or explain the action of your figures.



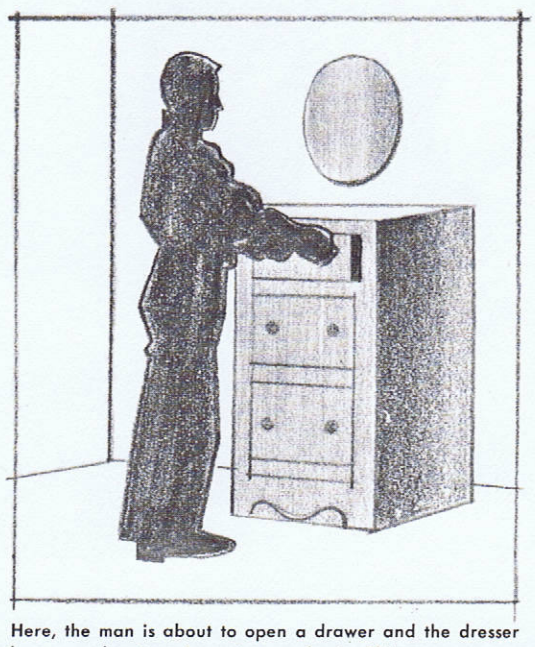
A figure, a dresser, a mirror, and a corner of a room — we shall use these in several simple arrangements to see how they affect each other and the over-all composition.



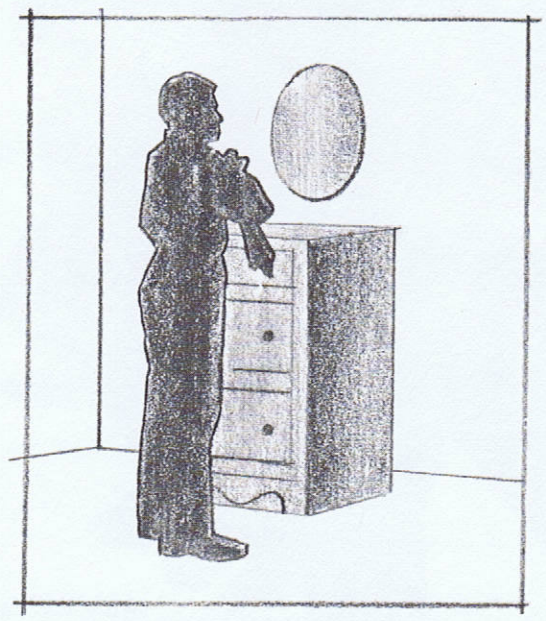
Here is an arrangement with all the objects merely grouped together. They create a unified but stiff composition. The dresser and mirror are inactive, and simply identify the setting as a corner of a bedroom.



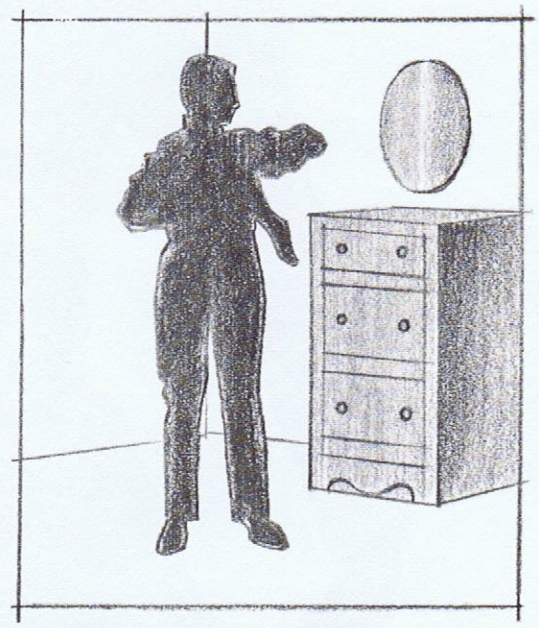
This one is more interesting. The figure has been brought to life and the background is now more directly involved. Simply because the man is leaning on the dresser, it becomes an active part of the composition.



Here, the man is about to open a drawer and the dresser becomes almost as important as he is. This arrangement is well organized. The figure and dresser are placed to make the action completely clear.



In this action the figure is looking in the mirror. Because the mirror is now more important than the dresser, the figure can logically overlap or block off more of the dresser than in the preceding picture.

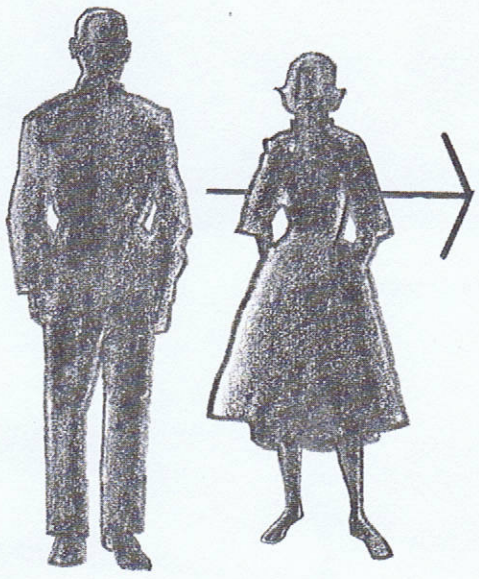


This composition is less obvious than the last one but shows the same action. It demonstrates a point to remember: Figure and object may be linked across a room by a gesture or a directional line of glance.

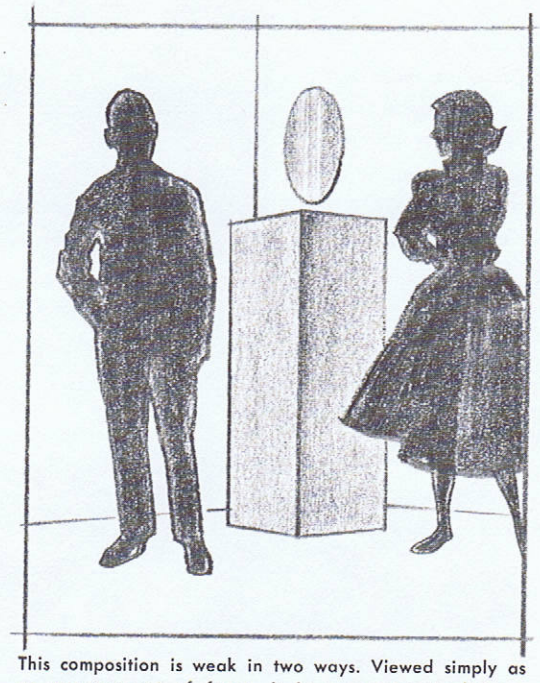
Now let's add another figure

As soon as we add another figure to our setting we create a human relationship. Our job is to see that this relationship is clear — that the two figures tell one story. As before, the setting should help to explain the story. It must not interfere with the relationship of the figures.

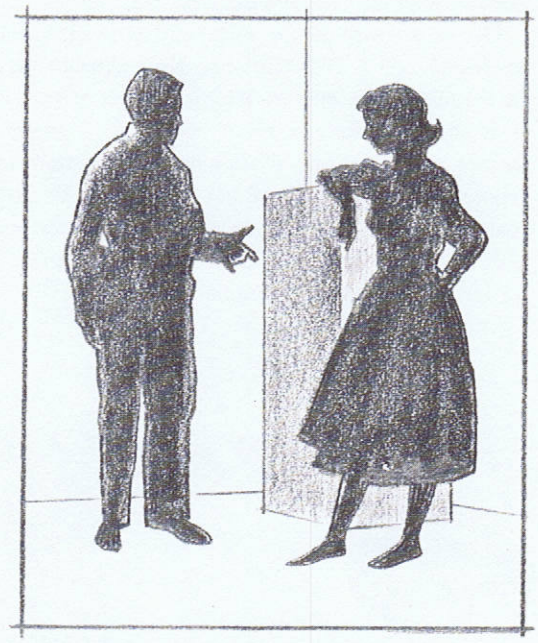
Since we now have a second figure in the same picture area, we must make more varied use of depth and change of size simply to get everything in.



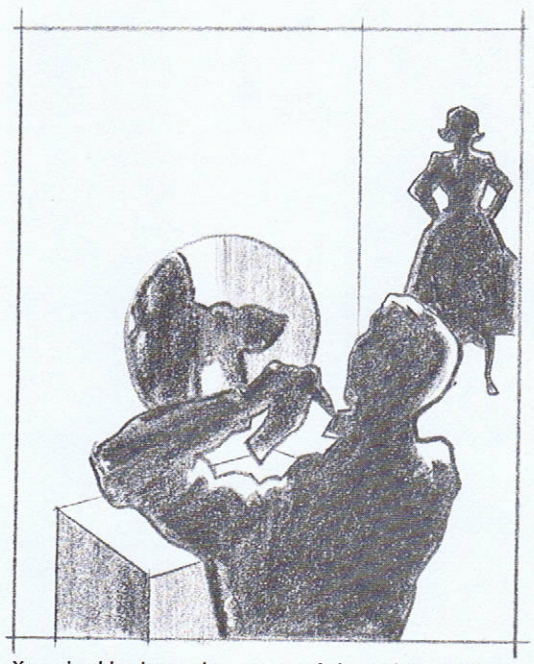
Using the same setting as before, we will now compose with these two figures.



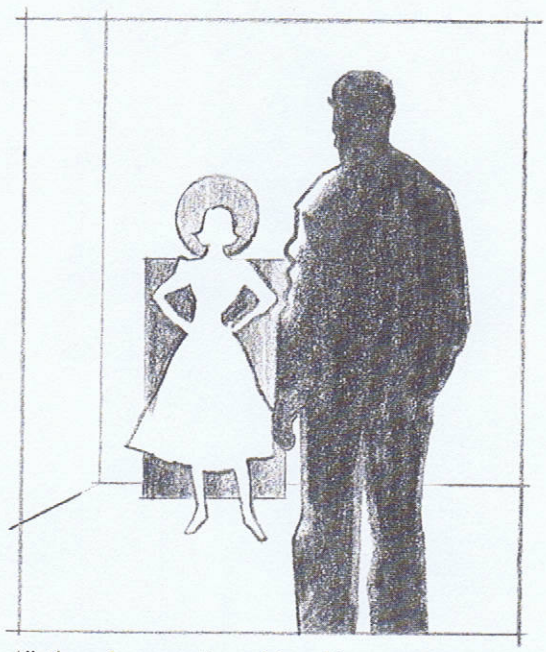
This composition is weak in two ways. Viewed simply as an arrangement of forms, it is a monotonous line-up. Because the dresser is centered, it tends to become as important as the figures. The mirror even interrupts the line of glance.



This arrangement is much better. The placement in the area is varied, and girl and dresser create a unified shape. The human relationship is uninterrupted — the man talks, the woman listens. The setting is actively involved but is not in the way.



You should always be aware of how things link up in a picture. Here, the man is related directly to the nearby mirror and to the woman, who looks at him. Overlapping and a change in sizes give the picture depth and add interest to it.



All three forms overlap, giving this arrangement considerable depth. The dresser and mirror serve mainly to set off the figure of the girl through a strong contrast of values. This is an important use to which the setting may often be put.

Line of glance and the man's gesture link the two figures closely. Dresser and man form a single shape that makes him even more dominant. At the same time the dresser, while identifying the scene, does not interrupt the human relationship.

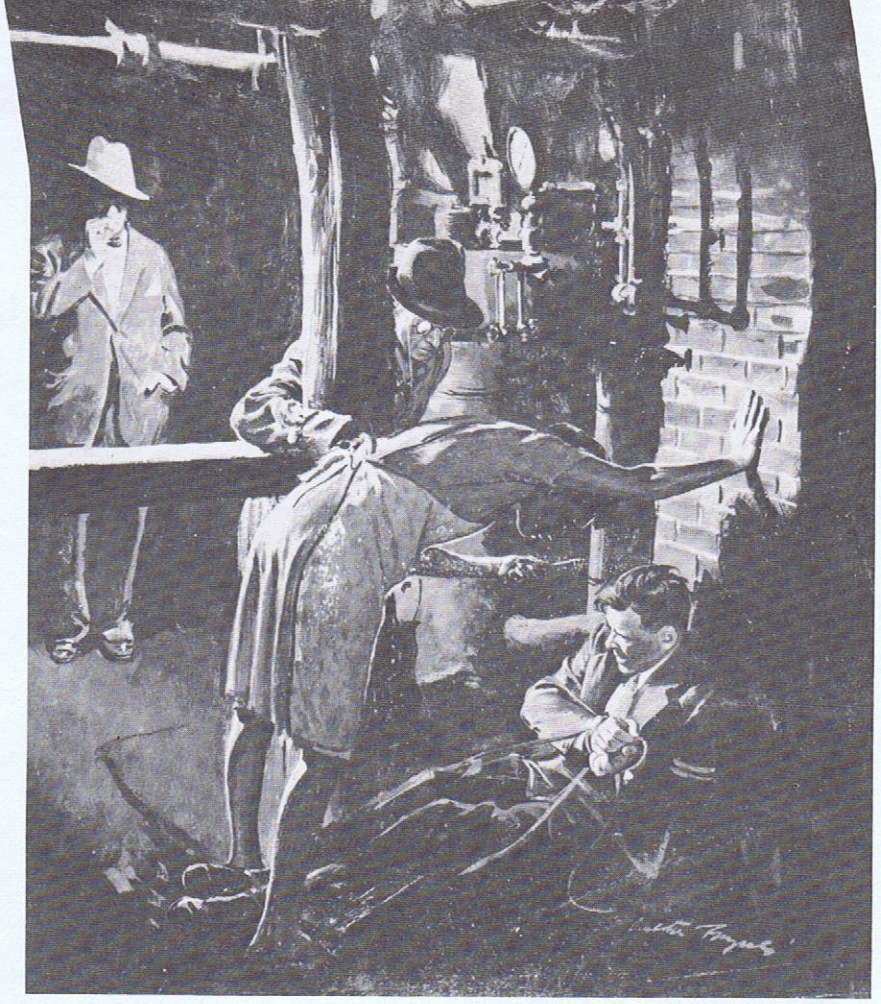
The setting must be right

Whenever you begin to make a picture with figures, you should have clearly in mind a definite background or environment which will contribute to the story you wish to tell. It should not only strengthen your illustration but it should be the best possible view of a generally appropriate background.

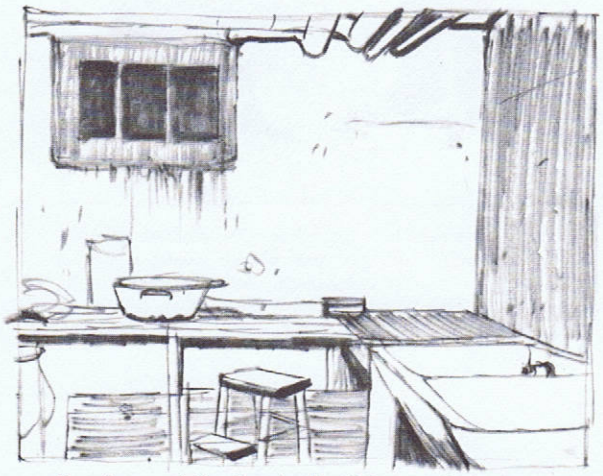
For example, a light love scene between two people could be made more convincing by a light, pleasant background. The same theme could be misleading or completely confusing if it were set against a dark, dramatic backdrop which did nothing to explain or support the picture idea.

Of course, situations do occur in surroundings that are not in keeping with them. From the picture-making point of view, however, these are unusual happenings. Your job as an artist is to make the picture consistent throughout, with both background and figures supporting each other.

On this page is an excellent demonstration of how a professional artist accomplishes this. Austin Briggs's problem was to illustrate a scene in which a man is tortured in a basement. A basement offers various views, and Briggs studied them all before selecting one which he felt contributed most to the sinister, dramatic mood of his subject. Like Briggs, from the very start you should work to develop an environment with a suitable atmosphere – one that will support the figures in the scene and stir the viewer's imagination.

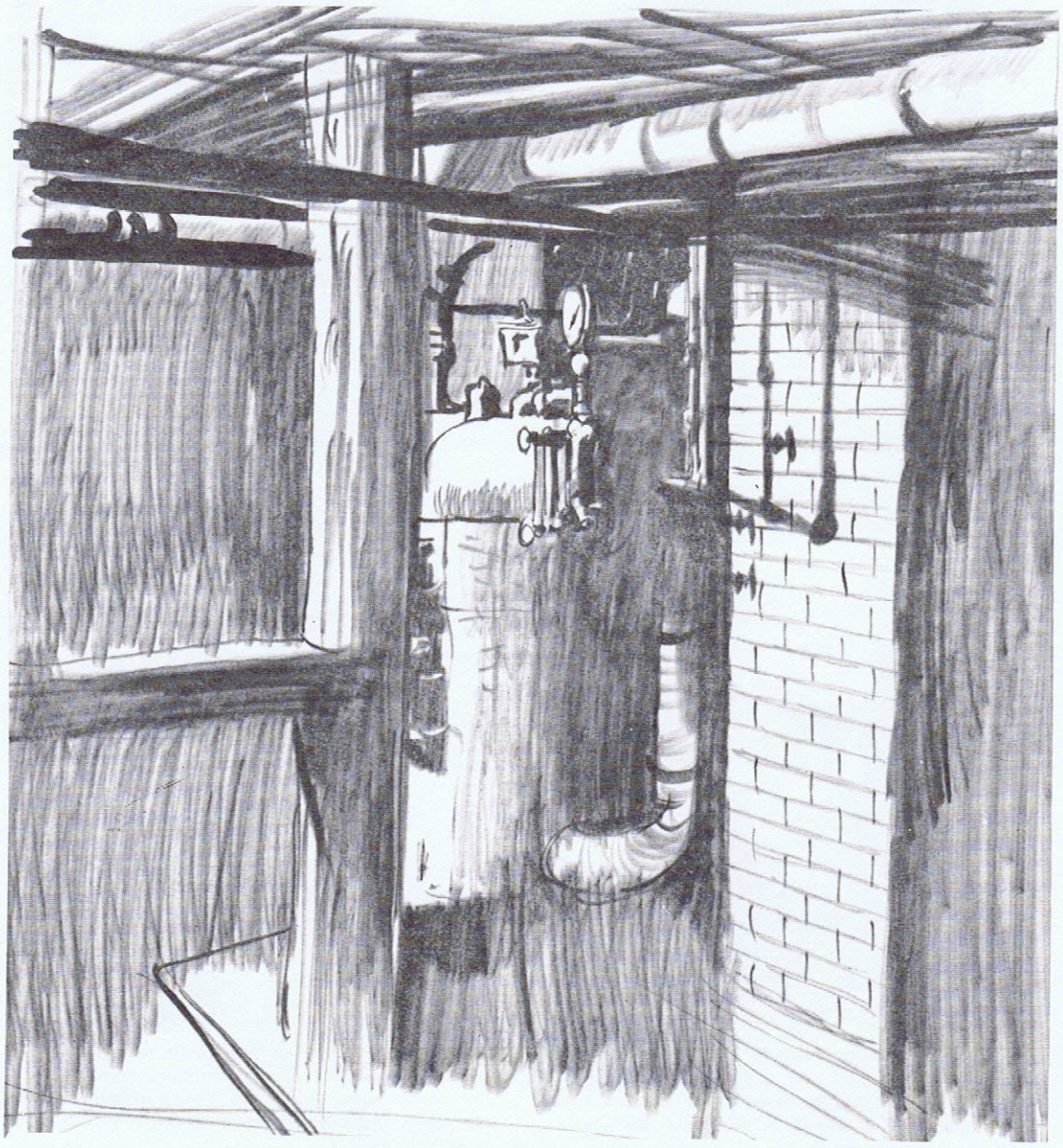


The finished painting — an excellent example of how the setting can establish a mood and strengthen a picture situation.



Here is one of the first sketches Briggs made in creating a setting for the picture. Although it was done in the same basement as the sketch finally used, this background would have been completely wrong. The objects shown are rather ordinary and there is nothing distinctive about the setting. The shapes are all horizontal and static, rather than dynamic. The lighting is completely lacking in dramatic quality. For some other illustration with an entirely different mood this background might have been fine — but not for this one.

The sketch at the right shows the background that Briggs actually used. As you can see in his painting at top right, he used practically every important feature. Notice the sinister atmosphere he created in this background in the painting through the careful treatment of lights and shadows. Even without the characters the background would have had a quality of mystery. The setting is so genuine and suggestive that it has become one of the chief actors in the drama.



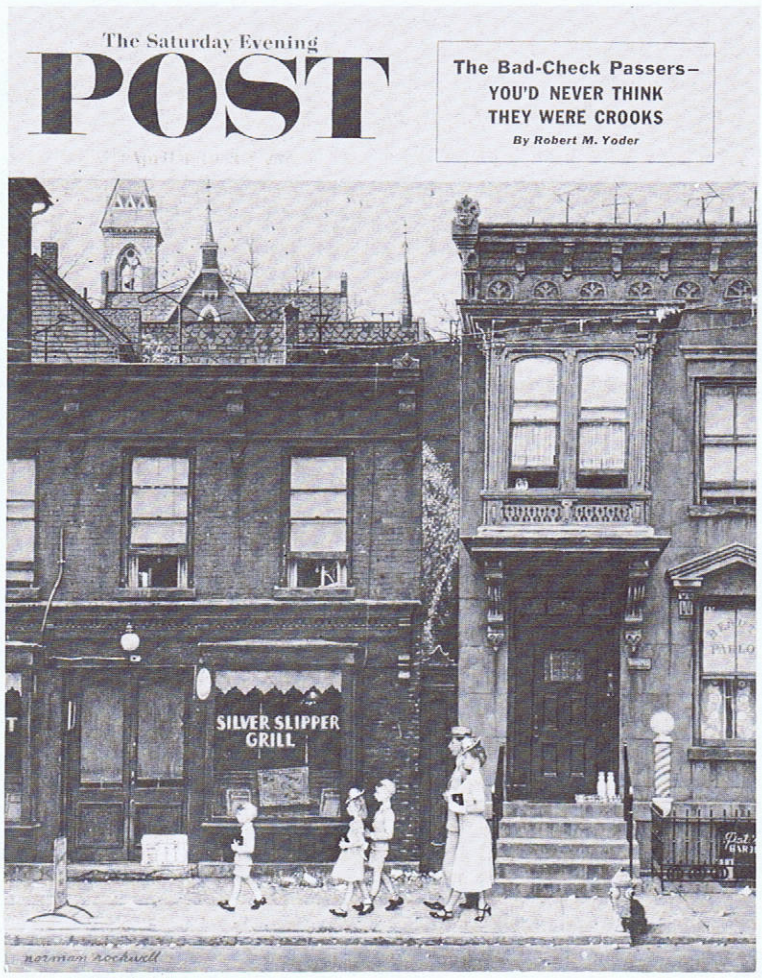
How to make the figures dominate the picture

Often, much of the point of a picture lies in the setting. We may, on occasion, have to make it almost as important as the figures themselves. In such cases we must give the setting the prominence it deserves but prevent it from overwhelming the figures. The three illustrations on this page show ways we can keep the figures dominant or from getting lost in their surroundings. Size, position, value, and contrast are among the most effective of the devices used by the artists here.

Courtesy Hiram Walker, Inc.

Robert Fawcett

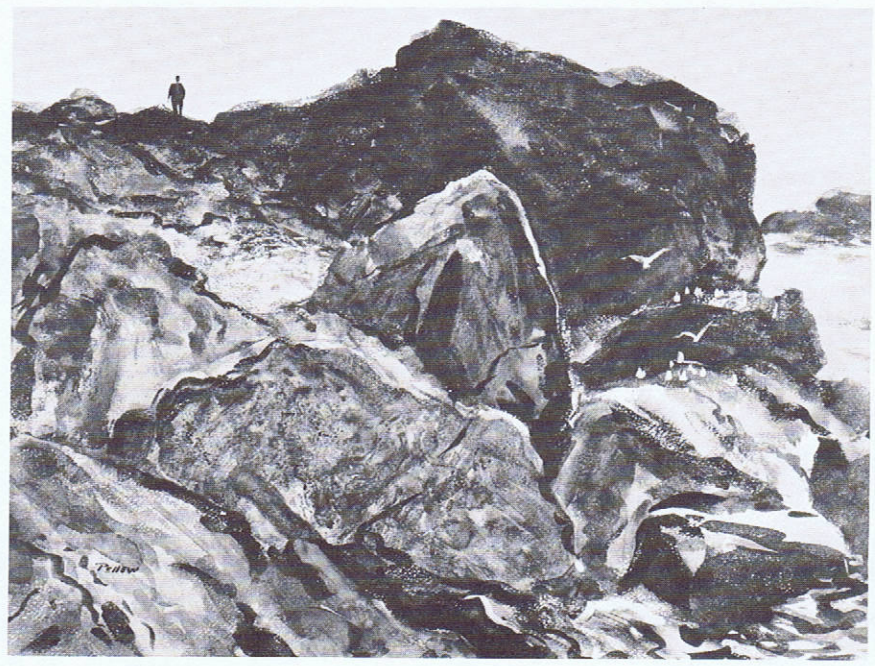
In this advertising illustration Robert Fawcett's problem was to show an interview between two men on a San Francisco street. Fawcett used size, position, and value to make his figures dominant, yet at the same time the location is very clear. This is because the artist made efficient use of the background. Even the small space between the figures shows one of the city's famous bridges and a view down one of its hilly streets.



© The Curtis Publishing Co.

Norman Rockwell

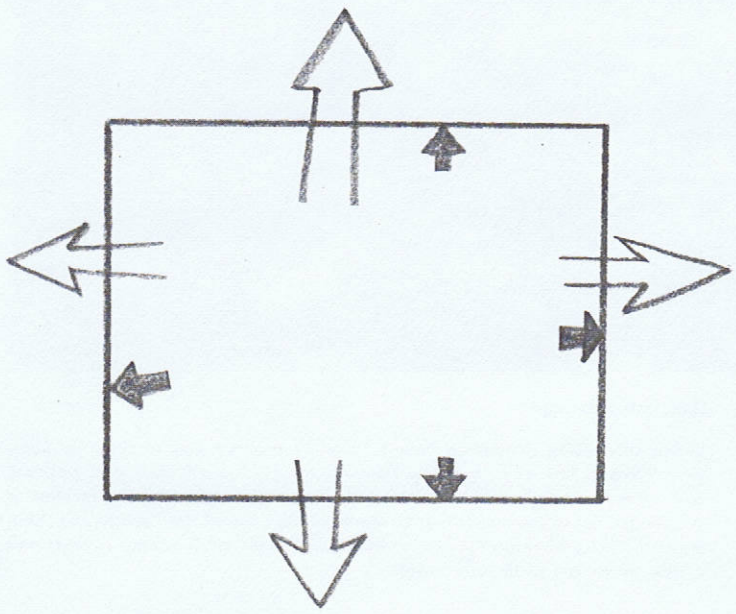
Here we see just the opposite relationship between figures and setting. The figures occupy only a small fraction of the picture space but we have no difficulty in focusing on them as the center of interest. They stand out chiefly because they are light, animated shapes set against a darker, static background. Their central foreground position also helps. The vertical lines of the edges of the buildings and their horizontal steps and bases play a part in leading our eyes directly to the figures, too.



John Pellew

Although this watercolor is filled with huge rock forms, the focal center of the picture is the small solitary figure. To keep it from getting lost, the artist silhouetted it against the sky. Notice, too, how its upright shape contrasts with the bulky rocks.

How our picture borders affect the figure's action

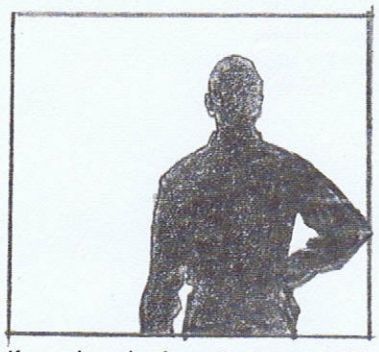


In the diagram at the left, the outline arrows suggest that there is a larger world outside the picture frame. Your placement of figures and objects must convince the viewer that such a real world exists beyond. At the same time you should never forget that the actual borders, indicated by the black arrows, are also a part of the picture. These borders can have a particularly strong effect when you are making a figure composition.

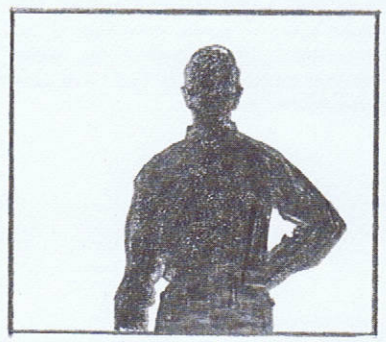
Depending on where you place the figure in relation to the borders, its action may be clear or confused. If, for example, you place a figure too close to a border, it may join up with the border, attracting the viewer's attention to the frame rather than the figure's action. Even when the figure does not touch the border, its gesture may direct the viewer's eye to the border in an undesirable way. More space between figure and border is a good remedy, as we show you below.

Where you place the figure within the picture frame is important in establishing figure motion. If a figure is placed nearer one border than the others, it tends to relate to it. We could say that the figure is attracted or pulled toward that border. We see the effect of this attraction in the bottom row of drawings. The proper placement of a moving figure will help greatly to speed up its action.

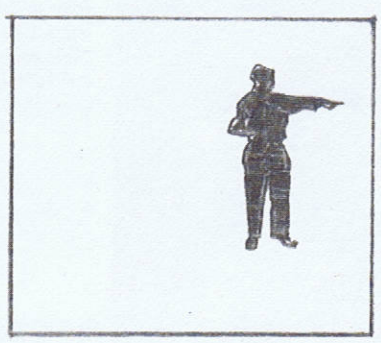
The border can confuse or compete



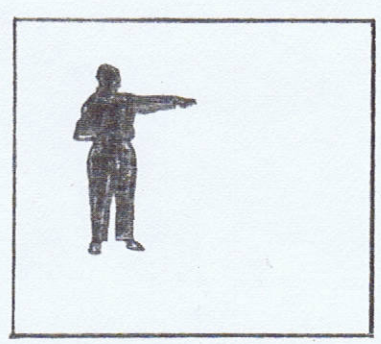
If we place the figure in the space this way, the hand-on-hip gesture pulls our eye sharply to the right border. The action is crowded by the edge of the picture — the elbow bumps the border.



The action becomes clearer when we move the figure away from the distracting border. This is strictly a matter of placement in relation to the border — the figure is exactly the same.



Here is an active gesture that points out a definite direction for the eye to follow. The gesture carries our eye right to the border and focuses on this edge. We look at the border rather than the action.



When the figure is moved back it is much easier to focus on the action itself. The border is now far enough away so that it doesn't compete with this action or become a focal point for the eye.

The border can help or hinder motion

Although the figure is drawn in a running action it lacks motion because it is the same distance from each border. All four sides exert an equal attraction on the figure — it appears frozen in the center.

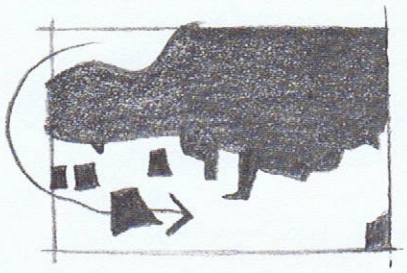
Now we have moved the figure so that it is cropped by the border. It seems to be caught on the frame — unable to free itself. The figure appears as static as it was when in the center.

In this drawing we feel a convincing sense of motion. The figure seems to race toward the near right border, which now attracts it. The space behind it suggests it has come this far.

Too much of a good thing is really too much. When the figure is moved so far to the right that it becomes a part of the right border, it is as static as it appeared in the first two drawings in this row.

Controlling the figure's movement

On the last page we saw how the border worked to create movement in a picture. Here two Faculty members show how to control movement. Notice that every element in the picture – objects, values, and even shadows – may be used for this purpose. They help to control not just the action of the figure but the movement of the viewer's eye, keeping it from being directed away from the center of interest and out of the picture.



Harold Von Schmidt

The figures may be rushing headlong out of the picture space but our eye must remain in it. Harold Von Schmidt keeps our attention inside this dramatic illustration by several means. The glance between Indian and girl holds our attention on the two figures. Her position closer to the right border tends to counteract the strong racing movement of all three figures out of the other side of the picture. Note that the greatest mass of the dark background is on the right-hand side of the picture, further slowing down the girl's movement. Also, the stumps are placed to lead our eye back into the composition. At the same time, they are dangerous obstacles in the girl's path, adding to her peril.

Courtesy Elk's Magazine

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Austin Briggs

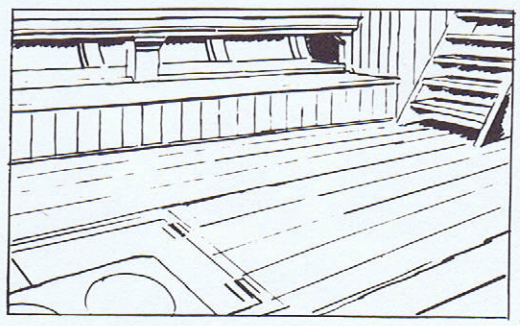
Here is another fine example of how things can be used to counteract figure movement and keep our eye within the borders. The dominant movement is to the left, with the large mass of the cabinet exerting a strong pull on the girl's figure. But the shadow shapes, and the rug in particular, lead to the right and counterbalance her swift action.

"Directing" your pictures – R.F. (Robert Fawcett)

You will find it very helpful to look at your picture-making job as if you were the director of a play or a motion picture. Like the director, you must wring every possible bit of meaning and drama out of your set, your characters, costumes and props, lighting, arrangement, and viewpoint. You must develop your picture from the ground up, planning and thinking through each of these aspects of figure composition, and making them fit together.

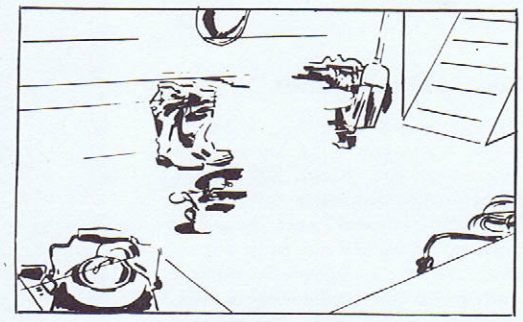
The large illustration below and the diagrams around it will help you fix the six important parts of "picture directing" in your mind. The painting, by Robert Fawcett, illustrates a story about two fliers picked up by a boat in the English Channel. In this scene, one of the exhausted fliers is struggling with a member of the boat crew who covets his binoculars. Fawcett tried out many possibilities before he arrived at the composition he liked best.

For the artist, this thinking through of the composition is one of the most important parts of picture-making. True, he will still have to make the picture – but it will be that much better because of the careful planning he did at the start.



The set: It should be appropriate and convincing — support the figures, not distract from them. Note how well Fawcett's setting meets these requirements.

The characters: Your cast should be not just any men or women, but figures that really look the part and are drawn in expressive actions.



The props: The right props help establish the scene and make it convincing. Don't use too many props or they may distract from the figures.

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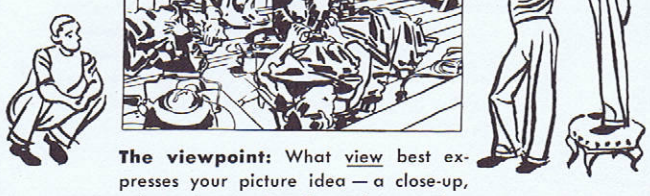
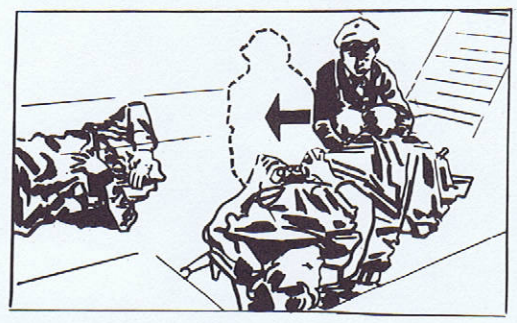


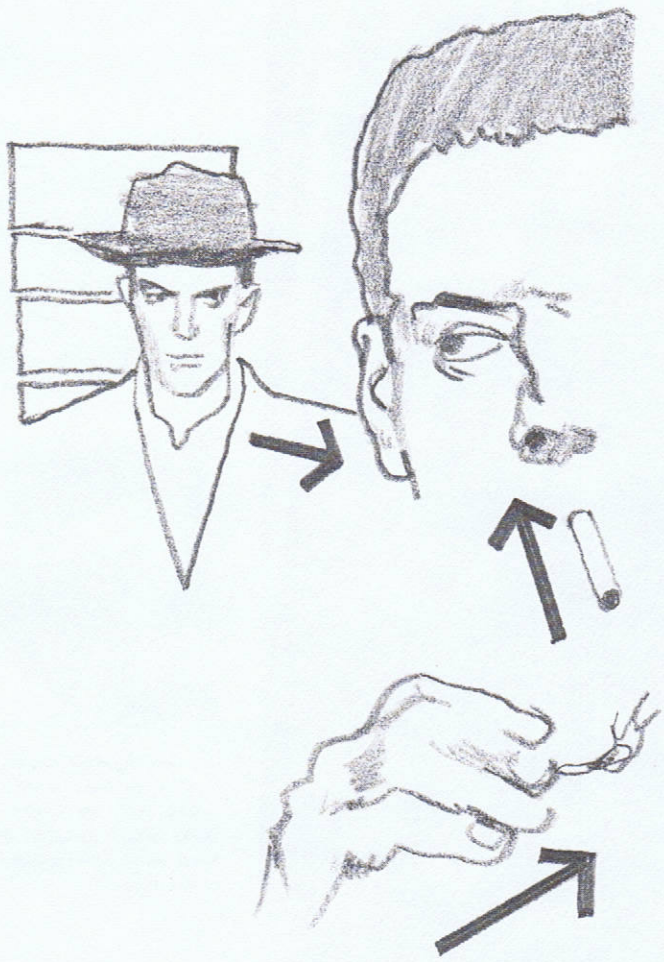
The viewpoint: What view best expresses your picture idea — a close-up, a long shot, a view from above or below? Consider all before you decide.



Arrangement: Move your figures and props around until you have a good, logical arrangement. This diagram shows Fawcett felt the upright figure should be moved to the center to strengthen the composition.

Lighting: Light and shade are two major elements in creating mood. Be sure they are appropriate. Use them to highlight characters and action. Here the artist has used strong overhead lighting for a realistic effect.

Careful planning creates mood and meaning



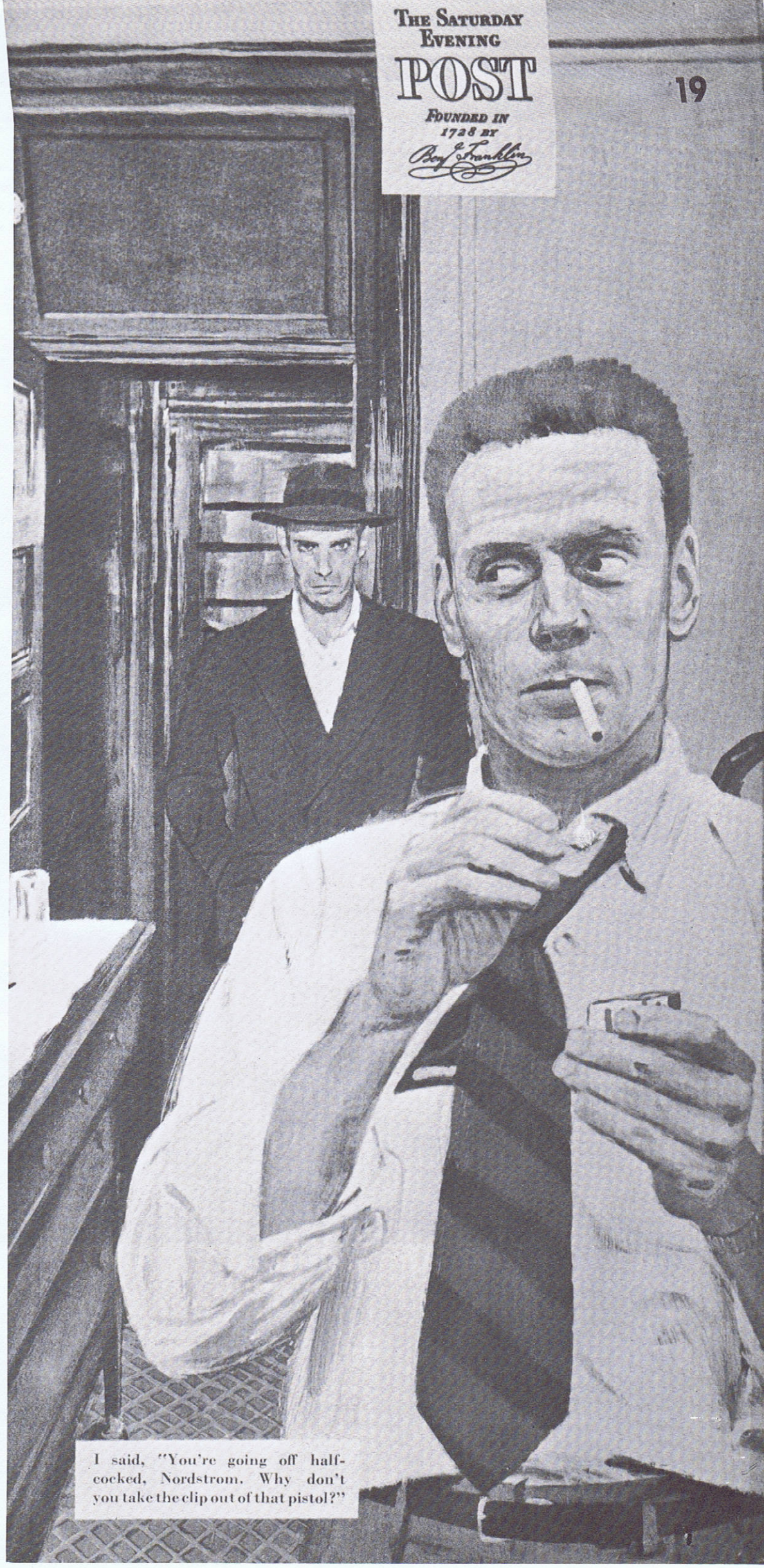
Here is an excellent example of how an outstanding artist applies the principles of composing we have just explained. Austin Briggs has carefully selected his setting, characters, costumes and props, lighting, and viewpoint to create a picture with a strong emotional quality.

Notice, first of all, the tension in the action of the figures. The glance of each is directed toward the other, and our eye darts back and forth between the two faces. We cannot miss the suspense written on them.

Everything has been planned to lead our attention to the two faces and keep it there. The tie and hands of the foreground figure lead up to the cigarette and then to his eyes. The doorway leads down to the sinister figure in back. His white shirt prevents his face from being lost in the dark background.

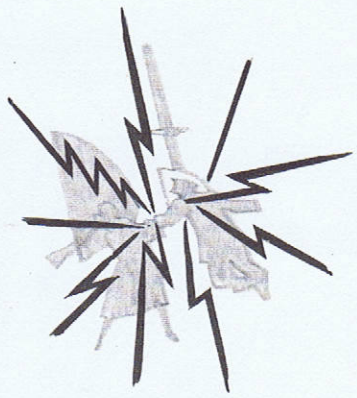
The viewpoint deserves notice, too. Briggs has moved in for a close-up view of his characters, so that we seem to be right there in the room with them. Their emotions can be felt much more directly this way.

This picture shows how strong psychological impact can be created, even though the action of the figures is slight. Because of the careful thinking behind the composition, we grasp the meaning of the situation immediately, and our attention is never allowed to stray from the heart of it.

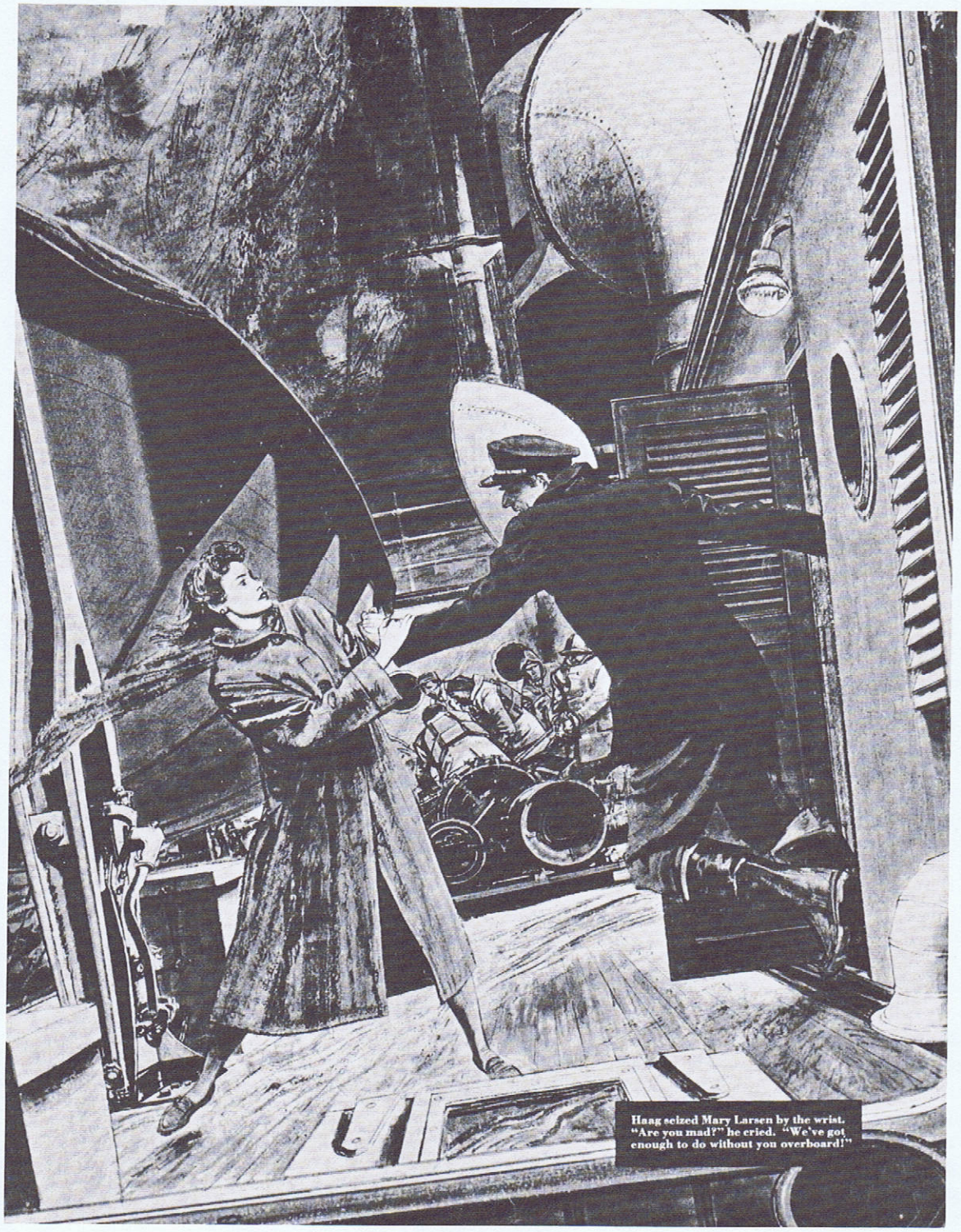


Every part contributes to the picture

This illustration of a tense moment aboard ship offered Fawcett a fine chance to use practically everything in the scene to highlight the dramatic action of the figures. First, the artist has chosen an interesting section of the ship in which to stage his drama. Then, he has selected the most exciting view of this section and, finally, arranged the objects in it to focus attention on the figures. Study this picture and the diagrams around it very carefully. They show you the thinking and compositional planning of a first-class artist.

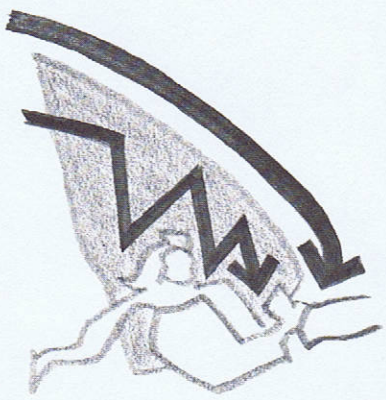


Our basic mood symbol of excitement and violence is strongly expressed. The dynamic, jagged lines and shapes of the setting support the dramatic gestures of the figures. The whole thing "explodes" — not because of subject matter but dramatic composition!

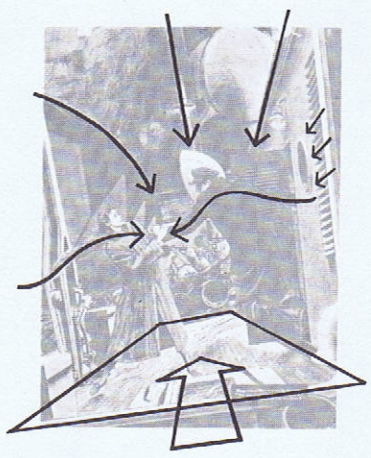


Haag seized Mary Larsen by the wrist. "Are you mad?" he cried. "We've got enough to do without you overboard!"

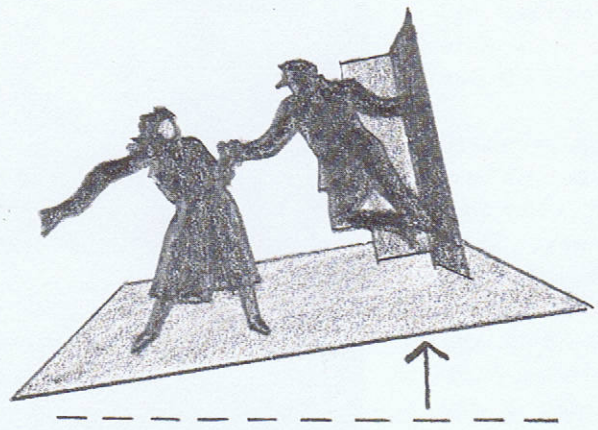
See how the dark hat stands out against the light ventilator. The reverse contrast (light against dark) is used to make the girl's head stand out against the side of the lifeboat.



Fawcett uses shapes and lines to add excitement — and to direct our attention, too. See how the lightning-like pattern of the lifeboat cover accentuates the girl's head, and the swift curve of the boat's upper edge leads the eye to the figures' locked hands.



Virtually every important line leads to the hands of the two figures. Even the short lines of the louvers at the right border and the lines in the deck hatch direct our eye toward lines in the setting and the figures leading to the center of interest.

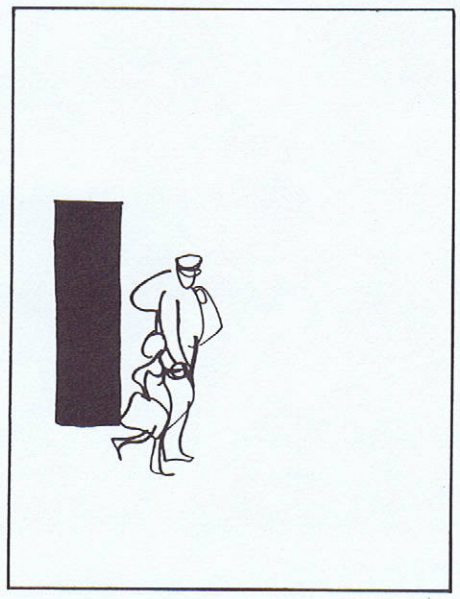


The listing deck plane sets the key of the composition. It establishes a dramatic diagonal note. The line of the arms and scarf repeats and strengthens this note.

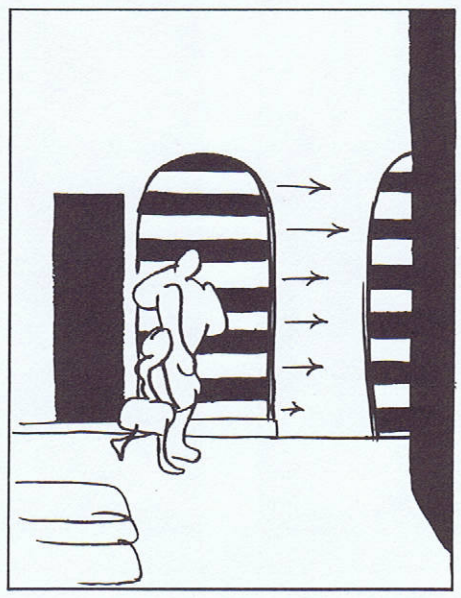
Summing up our principles

This illustration by Austin Briggs shows how to apply the points we have made so far in this lesson. Notice how the artist creates emotion and interest through the gesture and shape of his figures, the way he relates them to each other and to the picture space, and, finally, through the thoughtful selection and arrangement of the setting. In a well-composed picture, nothing happens by accident.

Briggs' first step in planning this picture was to select his models and photograph them in different positions. One pose *(top left)* was weak because the figures were separated and static. Another *(top right)* was better, but, despite the joined hands, the shapes seemed to fall away from each other and suggest unrelatedness. The pose directly above had everything he hoped for. It showed a warm human relationship and created a fine rhythmic shape. The heavy lines in the diagram point out the rhythmic repetition of lines and shapes within the figures.



The "busy" outline of the figures creates a sense of animation and movement. This is strengthened by the contrast with the straight, static lines of the narrow door.



The horizontal stripes of the archway doors emphasize the movement of the figures. These stripes also add a note of authenticity, as they are a typical part of the West Indian locale of this picture.

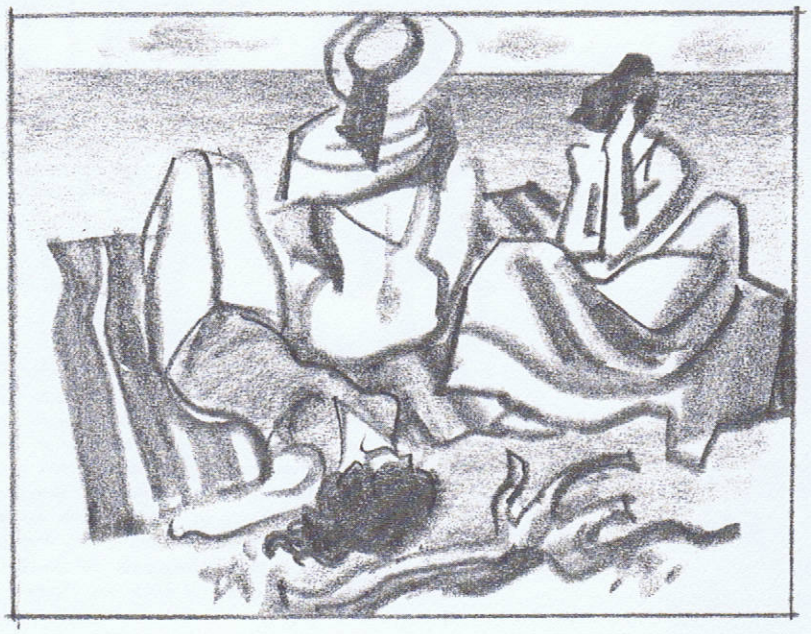
This diagram shows the main lines and shapes of the finished picture. The paving blocks, of course, create a feeling of depth. The balcony is placed directly over the figures to lead our eye down the vertical lines of the doors to them, and the arch further calls attention to the figures by framing them. Showing just part of the next arch suggests more space exists outside the border.

Sharpening up the picture idea

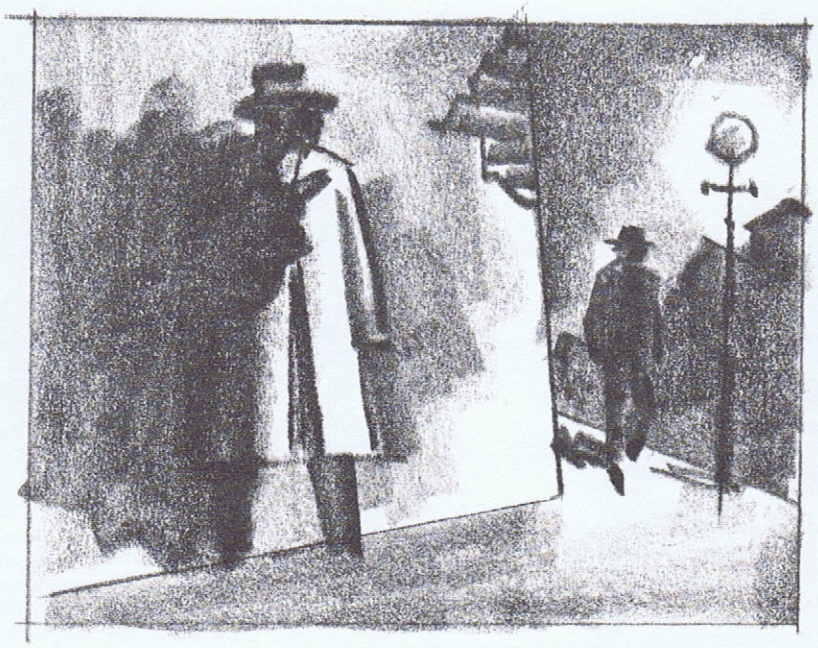
A composition may be well balanced, pleasant, and interesting, yet the picture may fall short of being effective. Usually this is a sign that the artist has not given enough thought to sharpening up the picture idea — to how he can get his idea across faster, more clearly, or with greater impact.

When you have composed a picture, sit back from your board and ask yourself: Does this arrangement really do what I want it to? Would the whole idea be clearer if I moved these figures closer together? Suppose I made one smaller and the other larger? Can I make better use of any part of the background to tie them together? Do I need to show this much background?

The time you spend in thought, asking and answering questions like these for yourself, is tremendously important. As the sketches below demonstrate, it can mean the difference between a picture which is merely pleasantly composed and one which expresses its meaning more effectively.



The picture at the left shows three women on a beach. They simply rest there, like inanimate objects. Nothing happens — there is no active human relationship between them. The picture at the right shows how you could take the same subject and give it the real human relationship it needs to make an interesting illustration. Now the two girls in the background are closer together. Perhaps they are whispering something about the third girl. The dark cloud behind the two girls suggests intrigue and ties them together. Dropping the horizon puts both heads above it, strengthening their association and separating them from the third girl. Turning this girl's head away from the others also helps isolate her.



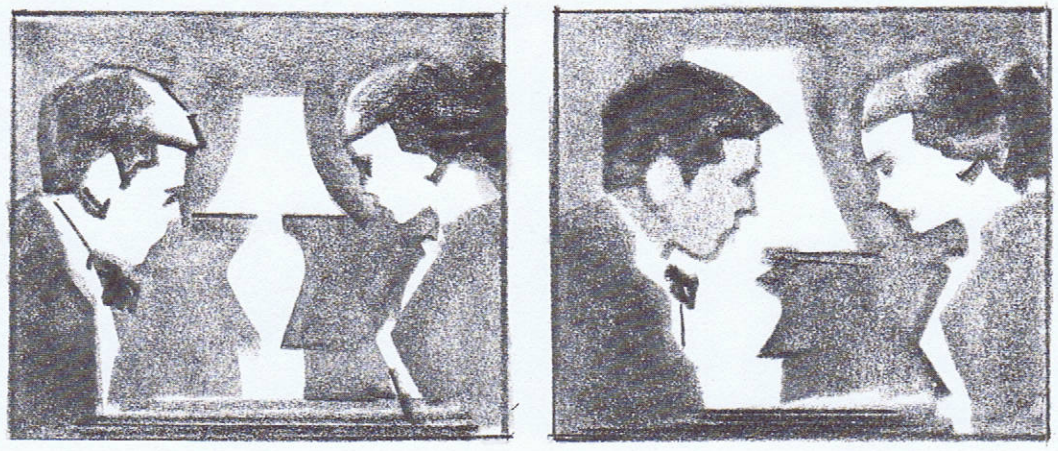
Here is another example of how a well-planned composition can be made into a more exciting and effective illustration. As a composition, there is nothing wrong with the one at the left— it has variety of shape and good direction of line. It is the kind of picture you might well settle for. However, by thinking and questioning as we mentioned above, you might arrive at the second composition. Since the larger figure is obviously sinister, why not let him loom up in the foreground, overwhelming the picture space just as he is about to overwhelm his victim? Why not use those horizontal stripes on the corner to carry the viewer's eye from gunman to victim? This new arrangement has another kind of impact — and might be just what is called for.

Points to remember

As you plan your pictures, try to form a clear mental image of the effect you wish to create. Don't settle for the first composition that comes to mind — think!

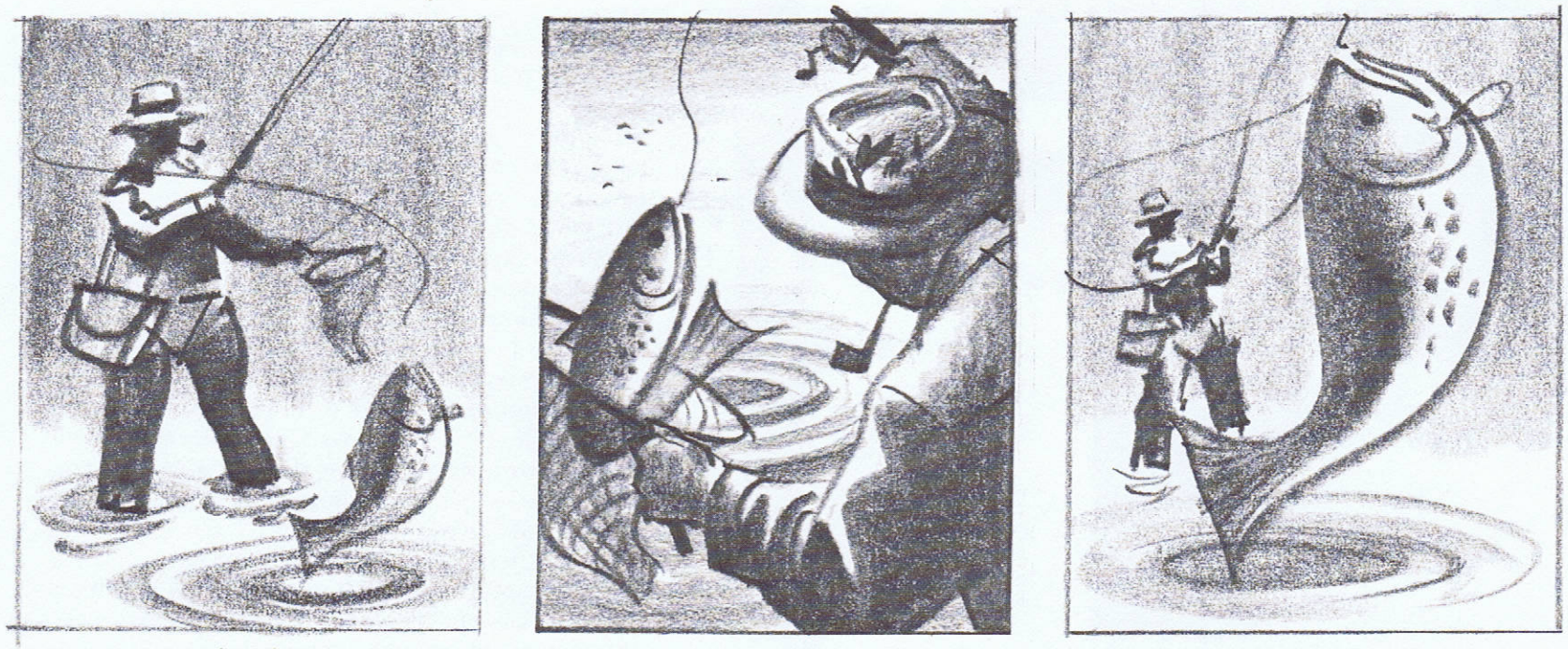
If you want to feature a certain figure or figures, don't let other figures or background elements distract the viewer's attention. And, if you want your figures to communicate instantly, don't lose sight of the mood symbols. Be sure the shapes and direction of lines in your picture express the feeling clearly. Think of the emotion you want the viewer to feel, and work to create it in your preliminary sketches.

You should make a number of preliminary sketches and then select the best of these to finish. Each one should be a thinking sketch — it should represent some new view or arrangement that you first visualized in your mind's eye. Don't make a lot of thoughtless sketches in the hope that one out of many might be the right one. There should be real thought behind each.



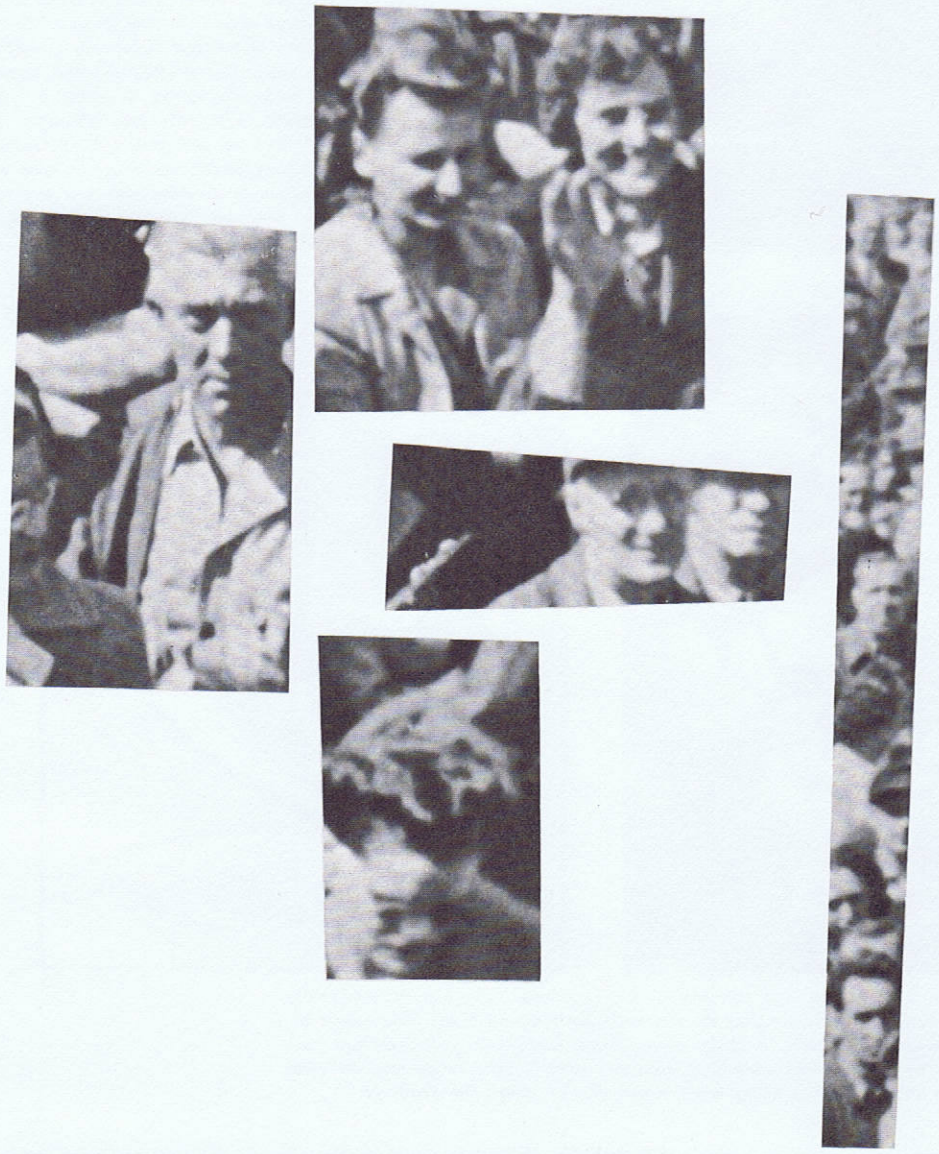
It is important to keep your setting and props from interfering with the figures and their action. In the first sketch the lamp is the center of interest because of its position — the viewer is distracted from the figures and what is going on between them. In the second sketch, the lamp no longer interferes — and the corner of the shade points directly to the girl, helping to tie the figures together. It also serves as a contrasting background for the man's face, adding more interest to the composition.

Try to keep a mood symbol in mind as you plan your main lines and shapes. This was not done in the first sketch — it completely lacks tension and drama. It's weak because it is made up chiefly of static verticals, horizontals, and rectangles. The other picture follows our explosive symbol. We seem to be part of the scene as we look over the gunman's shoulder. The low eye level creates diagonal lines that lead to the victim at the far end of the bar.



These three pictures show there are several ways to view a situation — and each one is best for a certain effect. In the first sketch our interest is divided between man and fish. The second picture concentrates on the man — it points up his role by putting us right behind him, where we can see his action in detail and join him in his experience. The last picture simply points out that the fish could be featured if the idea called for it. Each of these compositions is sound — but each one emphasizes something different. Always have a purpose in mind when selecting a viewpoint and an object for emphasis.

Photograph courtesy Ewing Galloway



Composing a picture with many figures

The principles with which we have composed first one, then two, then several figures are the same ones we use to arrange a whole crowd of people in the picture space. This is because a crowd is really nothing more than one or two expressive figures multiplied many times, with variations. If you can compose a few figures, you can compose many.

A crowd, just like an individual, may express any emotion – gaiety, sorrow, anger, or tension. Its mood can be a more subtle one, too – it may be indifferent, mildly curious, or merely waiting for something to happen, as in the photo above. Like the single figure, a large group of people must always express some mood or feeling. A crowd is never expressionless.

Although every figure in a large group may reveal the same basic emotion, they do it in different ways. Study a real crowd or a photograph of one and you will see how different their gestures and expressions may be. Unless you are aware of these individual variations and show them in your picture, it will become a monotonous repetition of forms and faces, a caricature rather than a convincing painting or drawing.

Figure composition — arranging figures in a picture

Photograph courtesy Melcher — Pix

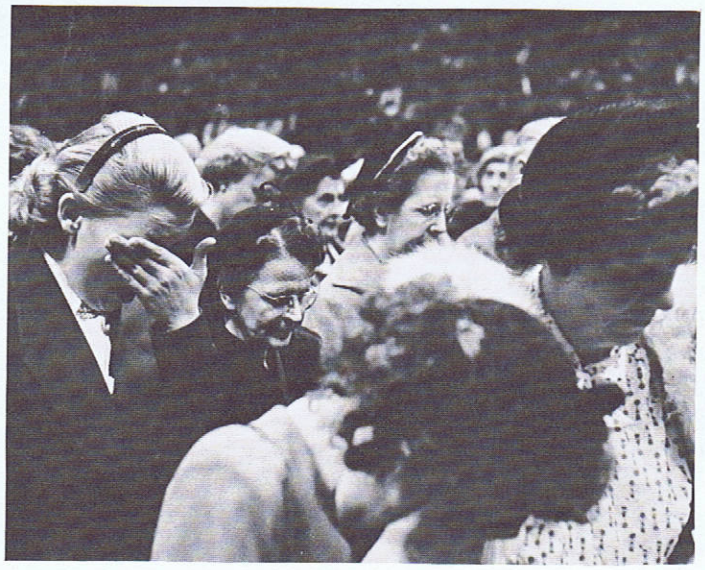
Terror: The wild, uncontrolled gestures of these toppling figures fit our symbol of explosive drama. The sense of terror in the unusual falling actions is strengthened by the violent pattern of diagonal lines.

Good examples of the variety of gesture and expression in a crowd can be seen in the picture sections at the bottom left of the opposite page. These were taken from the large photo above them. Although practically every figure is facing front, notice that some heads are held high, some are bowed, others are cocked to one side. The clothing is different from person to person, too; some wear hats, some don't. Values also vary — some figures are in light, some in shade. Even the space between various figures is different.

In the large photo, notice the gradual loss of detail in individual figures from the front to the back of the crowd. The expressions and gestures of the nearest figures are clearly seen. These set the mood for the parts of the crowd where you cannot see the faces clearly.

The pictures on this page show crowds in some typical moods. Notice how the gestures and emotions of each group follow the pattern of our mood symbols.

Photograph courtesy Bob Henriques — Pix



Sadness: The bowed heads, the faces in shadow, and the downward glances all express solemn grief. This mood would be clear even without the figures wiping tears from their eyes.

Photograph courtesy Wide World

Joy: The upraised arms of these figures signal a joyous welcome — a perfect demonstration of our universal symbol of gladness. We find this mass of jubilant faces and waving arms more interesting because of the intriguing variety of gestures and expressions.

Photograph courtesy Associated Press

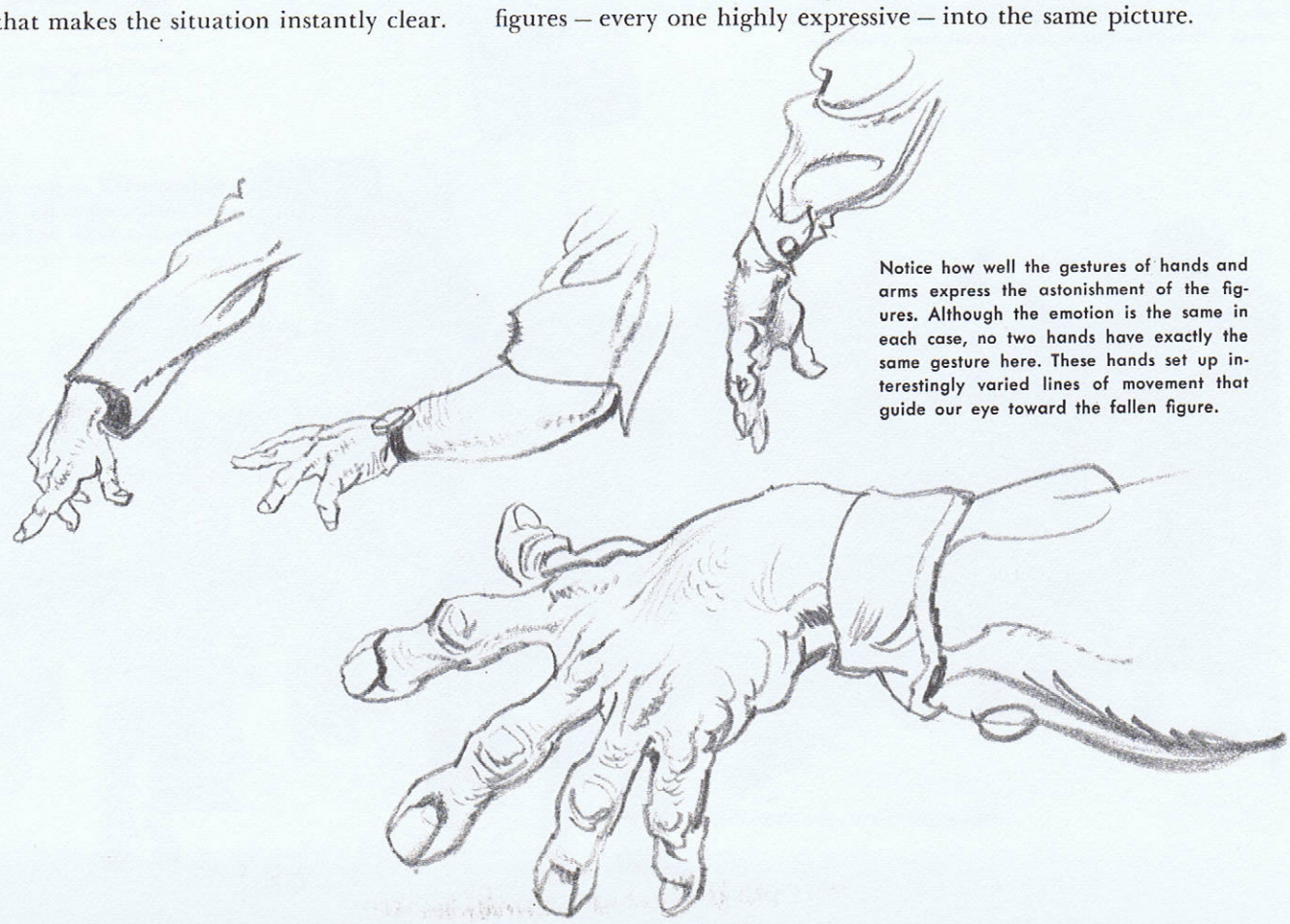
Violence: This surging, milling crowd conveys a feeling of excited action. Note the ragged, active outline formed by the running legs below and the placards above. Our eyes follow the turned heads to focus on the center of interest at the left.

Composing a crowd scene – ALBERT DORNE

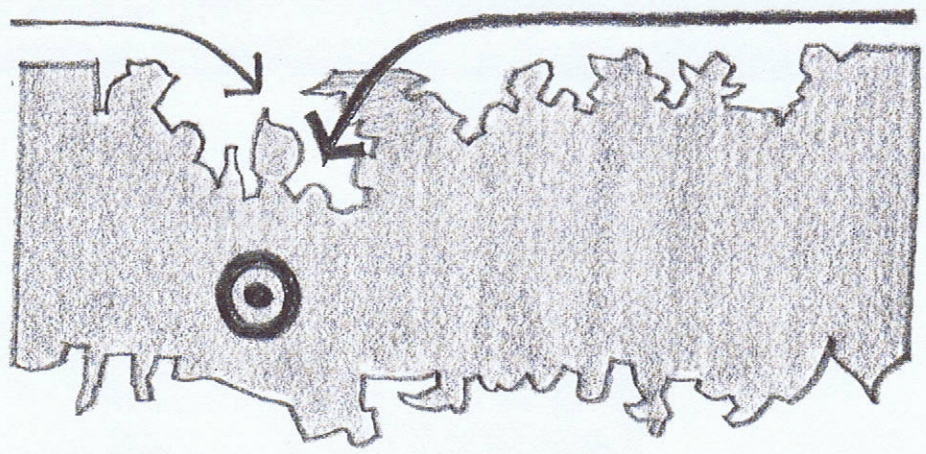
There is no question about the mood expressed by this crowd. It is clearly one of strong astonishment. Each of the bystanders registers excited surprise in his own individual way. Because of the variety of expression and gesture with which Albert Dorne filled his picture, it has great animation and interest.

Everything about this crowd scene was carefully designed to tell a story clearly and forcefully. Made to illustrate a tale about the filming of a Western motion picture, it shows a cowboy hero who has just knocked out an unlikable actor, to the enormous surprise of the producer, the director, and everyone else in view. The four main characters are at the left, and each is shown in a pose that makes the situation instantly clear. Dorne has arranged the crowd around these figures in such a way that every major line and shape – and many minor ones – lead our attention to the drama unfolding at the left and its center of interest, the prostrate figure. The figures are so active and alive that they almost walk off the page – yet each is placed where it will help the composition the most!

Some of the major points of composition in this picture are explained in the diagrams. Particularly worth noting here is the economical way Dorne uses his setting. He suggests a whole barroom by showing just the end of the bar, the hanging lamp, and the chair at the lower right. This enables him to fit fifteen figures – every one highly expressive – into the same picture.



Notice how well the gestures of hands and arms express the astonishment of the figures. Although the emotion is the same in each case, no two hands have exactly the same gesture here. These hands set up interestingly varied lines of movement that guide our eye toward the fallen figure.



The over-all shape: This diagram represents one of the first things to consider — the over-all shape of the crowd that makes up the picture. Note that Dorne planned the main break in the busy outline along the top of the shape to lead directly down to the bald man who points to the center of interest. Also note that the main break in the outline along the bottom of the over-all shape is the leg of the fallen figure. Dorne carefully planned these breaks to draw our eye to the center of interest.

The individual figures: With the over-all shape planned to bring our attention quickly to the center of interest, individual figures must be arranged to do the same job within this shape. The heads of both hero and bartender — and, in fact, those of all the other people in the picture — are turned downward toward the fallen figure, directing our eye toward it.

Relating the main characters: Our main characters must relate properly in both human and compositional terms. Our hero swaggers over the prostrate bully, and the Hollywood producer and director are clearly overcome with astonishment. The horizontal figure, placed right next to the hero, emphasizes his height and manliness. The bent posture of the other two figures makes them secondary to the hero.

Setting the keynote: Once the main characters have been composed, the crowd is fitted in around them. The large figure at the right gives us the feeling that we are standing just behind him. His reaction to the scene is shown with great clarity in the gesture of his hand and the expression on his face. These establish the keynote — they are repeated, with many variations, in the other figures. Again, it is important to note that the expression and gesture of each character is different in every case.

There are many considerations in good illustration — ALBERT DORNE

The over-all design of the page or spread should always be considered in planning an illustration. In this two-page effort I could use about two-thirds of the total area for the picture. This sketch was one of several I discarded.

This layout gave me a more interesting picture area for what I had in mind, with more characters, props, etc. However, I did not quite hit it.

This was the sketch finally submitted to the client. The composition has been opened up considerably, and I have introduced all the elements I originally had in mind — including the customers in the foreground, the extra cop, the barber chair and customer, the shine boy, and plenty of barbershop. Note how this composition permits the characters to rivet their attention on our hero, thus creating the air of tension I wanted. Except for the absence of women, this could have been it.

The following case history of a two-page illustration for *Cosmopolitan* shows the evolution of a composition with many figures. Using a minimum of props and background, it is an interesting solution of the editor's problem and demonstrates how figures alone can be used to create the entire design. As we progress you will see that a modest start in compositional thinking can, in the interest of making a good picture, grow into a rather complicated effort – but often with a rewarding result.

Usually there are several situations in every story that may be illustrated. The artist can always find an "easy" picture – and make a good one – simply by using one or two characters and the obvious compositional devices. However, only the sincere artist and craftsman will take on a tough, involved story situation in an effort to produce the best possible picture for both fine illustration and artistic achievement.

The story here illustrated is a hilarious one of a barber who, on being mistakenly accused of murder, resents being arrested. To prove it, he gives a vigorous if not artistic demonstration in the art of using a razor on a group of policemen.

As the story goes, the police call on the barber in the midst of his work. The fight starts in the shop and winds up on the sidewalk. My first thought was to set the scene in the interior of the shop. The police have just walked in and tapped our hero on the shoulder, thus creating an air of tension. While the story contained several amusing situations, I felt that this one presented a provocative picture idea and would still not give away the plot. This is one of the cardinal rules in successful illustration: Intrigue your audience into reading the story – but do not disclose the plot or solution.

I felt also that this scene could present some amusing overtones in a picture – especially with an interesting barbershop background, customer characters, props, etc. I made some rough sketches and discussed them with the art editor of the magazine.

He liked the idea, but he brought up an important editorial point (and this is a very necessary consideration in successful illustration). "The audience who buy and read *Cosmopolitan*," he told me, "are predominantly women. We have learned over a period of many years through polls, reader research, and other methods of sampling public opinion – that our readers prefer pictures with women in them."

This fact of course eliminated the barbershop-interior idea, since the barbershop symbolizes one of the last private frontiers for the male. The idea then came up – how about moving the scene out in front of the shop? If we did that, we could show the fight in full action, with the additional possibility of an exciting crowd scene – and of course it would be perfectly legitimate to introduce lady passers-by into the picture.

I returned to my studio and went to work with the following result – an editorial illustration that was selected by the Art Directors Club of New York as one of the best for that year.

Discarding all my previous efforts at the barber-shop interior, I moved outside the shop to create the fight scene suggested by the client.

Always keep in mind your type area.

1 After several tries, this looked pretty good. The foreground cop across the gutter of the two pages holds the figures together, the patrol wagon and sidewalk add bulk and depth — but I don't like the foreground cop cut exactly in two, and the right side of the composition is too static.

2 When stumped for a picture plan, I often stimulate some new thinking by making a lot of doodles to establish the action of my characters.

3 The doodles have suggested a fresh approach to the composition. The design of the struggling figures indicates a new action for the cop. The overlapping line of his arm, continuing the fight action from the club-swinging policeman around to the new foreground figure, creates a good frame for the main action.

4 The composition seems completed. The vertical lines of the lamppost and patrol wagon oppose the violent action of the fight and the movement of the crowd, thereby adding stability and balance to the picture. The stores in the background provide local color. But, in spite of good design, the elements seem too contrived.

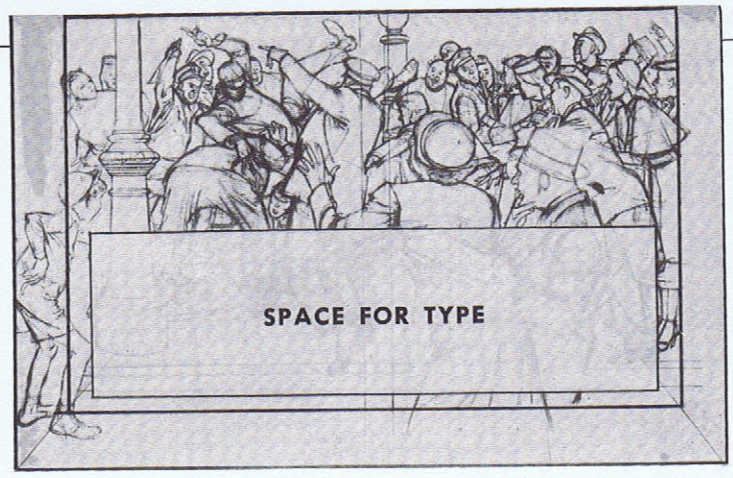
5 Here is quite a change. Removing the patrol wagon has "opened up" the picture and permitted me to introduce more characters. The added interest of these new people more than compensates for removal of the patrol wagon form. The rigid vertical lines of the lamppost and barber pole are still sufficient to counterbalance the movement of the figures. I think I am now on the right track for a good illustration. The characters rather than the props are now creating the design and pictorial interest.

Always keep in mind the gutter that separates the pages.

Figure composition — arranging figures in a picture

I take on more work . . . the drawing keeps growing

On studying the composition I feel the background is unnecessary, so in this next sketch I use just the barber pole to set the locale. The design of the heads becomes more apparent; the man in the foreground, with his hand now on his chin, is more humorous. It strikes me that when type is incorporated the picture will seem too "tight." Therefore, in the final sketch *(below)* I add more picture area.



The finished tissue drawing, showing the results of careful planning, meticulous research, hard work, and drawing, is a solid foundation on which good pictures can be built.

Four new characters, including the dog, are added on this side.

Now that the picture is enlarged the type area seems less crowded against the left and right borders of the illustration.

Three new characters are added on this side.

The finished painting as reproduced in *Cosmopolitan*.

Refer back to the first sketch at the very beginning of the sequence. You will note that while I started with six characters, in the interest of doing the best picture for this special problem I wound up with over thirty characters. I urge you to consider this, for it is in a way my own philosophy toward my art—

"the very best picture I can do, no matter how much or how hard the work."

FAMOUS ARTISTS COURSE
Student work
Lesson 8
Figure composition -- arranging figures in a picture

HOW TO PRACTICE AND PREPARE FOR THIS LESSON

This lesson demonstrates that when you compose a picture with figures in it, you must show them as real human beings -- people who express mood and emotion, and react to each other. You must consider these human qualities in addition to the fundamentals of composition you learned in Lesson 3. Here are some suggestions for study and practice which will help you apply these new considerations to your work:

1. Make drawings with one or two figures, like those you see on pages 4 and 5. Each figure should clearly express a definite action or emotion and be convincingly related to the other figure, if there is one. The over-all shape should tell the story at a glance. As you gain experience, make compositions with more figures. Look through magazines for illustrations that make good use of figure gesture or shape to heighten the mood of the picture.

2. Study the effect of the setting on the figure by making small compositional sketches similar to those on pages 12 and 13. Note that every change in the setting affects the figures and their action in some way -- contributing to or detracting from the over-all effect.

3. Make other small pencil compositions in which you vary the size of your figures as shown on page 15. Be sure the figures are always the center of interest in these compositions.

4. Controlling the movement of the viewer's eye is an important part of composition. Review pages 18 through 21 of Lesson 3 and pages 19 and 20 of Lesson 8 and then make some sketches in which you direct the viewer's attention to the focal center by the careful arrangement of your picture elements.

5. Following the examples on pages 16, 17, and 21, make some compositions in which you control the movement of the figures. See how changing the position of the figure in relation to the borders and the main picture elements slows the action of the figure or speeds it up.

6. Compose crowds. These should clearly reveal a basic mood or feeling as shown in the examples on pages 25, 26 and 27.

As you study and practice, your whole emphasis and concentration should be on carefully choosing effective sizes, shapes, and positions for the figures and props in your pictures. Keep your sketches simple. As you draw, think! Ask yourself -- Would the effect be better if I moved these two figures closer together? Is this one too close to the border? Are the figures too similar in size? Does this whole plan -- the lines, tones, shapes, etc. -- convey the mood and feeling I want in my picture? Think! Question! That's the only way you will succeed in communicating your feeling to the viewer.

THE ASSIGNMENTS YOU ARE TO SEND IN FOR CRITICISM

ASSIGNMENT 1. Make two figure compositions which express emotion. In the first one, use one figure -- in the second, use two figures. Select any two of the following moods or emotions: fear, love, worry, hate, surprise, weariness, calm, conflict, joy, gloom, violence, or mystery. Do not copy any of the figures in the lesson. Create your own -- and be sure they convey the feeling you want.

Do these compositions in pencil -- shade them if you wish, but remember it is the basic action and shape of the figure that count -- so don't bother with details. Make these drawings $3\frac{1}{2}$ inches wide by $4\frac{1}{2}$ inches high on a sheet of 11 x 14-inch drawing paper. If you prefer, you may do them on separate pieces of paper, cut them out and fasten them down neatly with tape on an 11 x 14-inch sheet of paper.

Label the mood of each composition and mark this sheet -- ASSIGNMENT 1.

ASSIGNMENT 2. Make two versions of the following situation, presenting it from two different viewpoints. You may select any background or types of people you wish. If you prefer, you may omit the background and handle the picture as a vignette similar to the pictures on page 11.

> The action takes place in the living room of an average American home. There are three people present --

(over, please)

young Harris, his mother, and Police Lieutenant Wade. As young Harris sits waiting anxiously for the next question from Lieutenant Wade, the attitude of his mother shows worry and bewilderment. Suddenly the policeman wheels and points an accusing finger at the young man. "You did it! You killed her!" Young Harris gasps, overcome with fear and horror. His mother reacts with shock and disbelief.

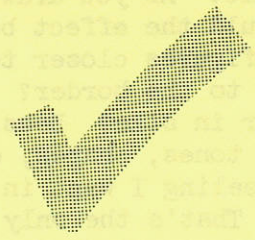
Visualize attitudes and gestures that clearly reflect the feelings described. Here's the place to use the basic figure to real advantage. It's not the incidental things such as a badge or uniform that tell the story. It is the right gesture, decisively drawn, that really sets the mood. Don't depend on your memory or imagination alone -- look up reference material, use your scrap file, ask friends to pose. Although this is an active scene, the action doesn't have to be extreme or violent to be effective.

Use everything you've learned from this lesson. Also use everything you learned about area, depth, line and value to get the mood and meaning of the situation across. Take advantage of individual gesture and expression, but, above all, remember it is the effect of the whole composition that counts most in getting the picture idea across.

We will judge your pictures on how well you convey the drama of the situation and how interestingly you arrange and group the figures.

Do these compositions in pencil. Each should measure $5\frac{1}{2}$ x 7 inches and may be either horizontal or vertical. If you do them on separate sheets of paper, cut them out and mount them together on a sheet of 11 x 14-inch paper or board.

Mark this sheet -- ASSIGNMENT 2.



Check
before mailing

IMPORTANT: Letter your name, address and student number in the lower left-hand corner of each drawing. In the lower right corner, place the lesson number and assignment number.

Your lesson carton should contain:

Assignment 1
Assignment 2
1 Return shipping label filled out completely.

Mail this carton to:
FAMOUS ARTISTS COURSE, WESTPORT, CONN.